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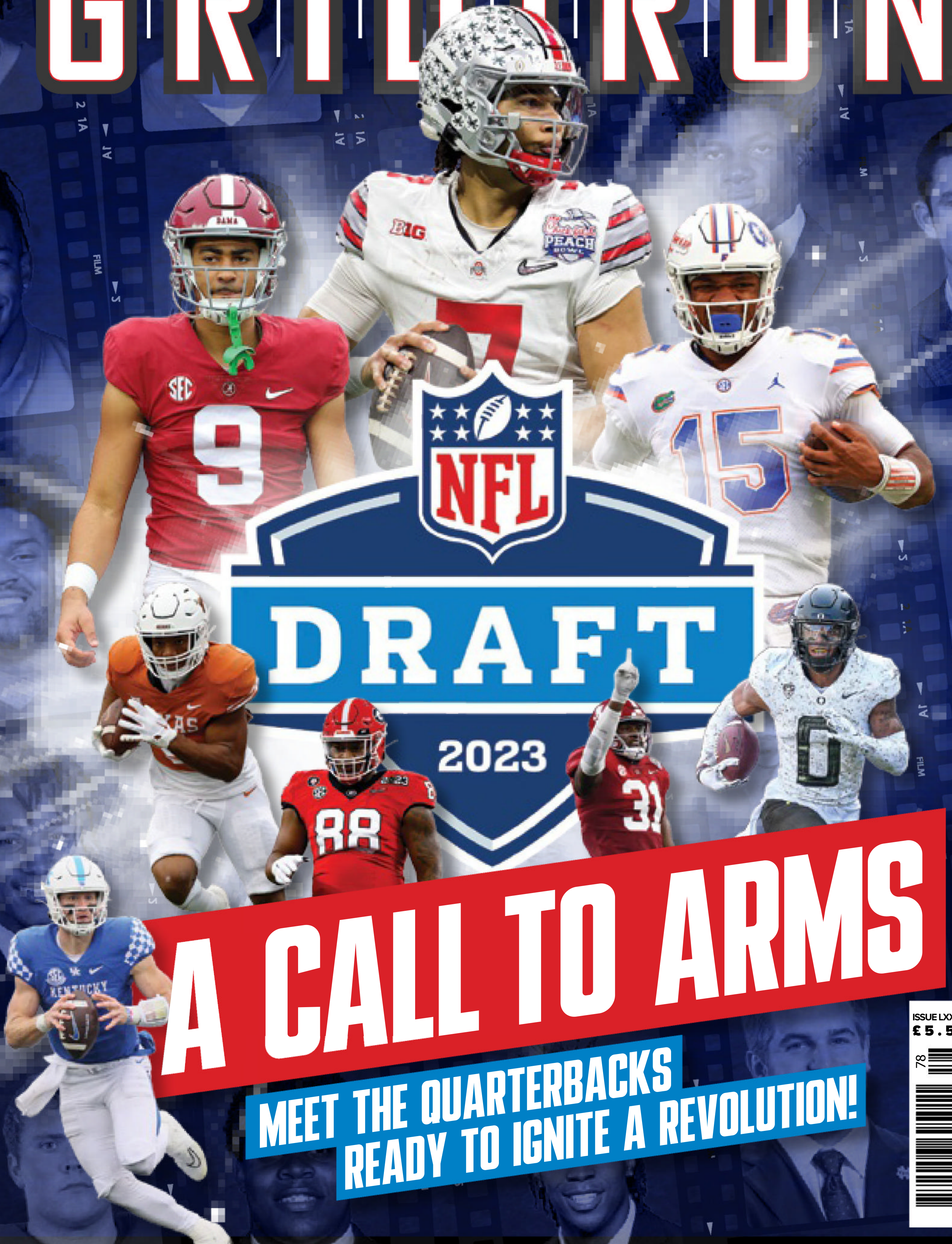

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THE BIG PICTURE

JUST WANT MOORE

D.J. Moore has kissed goodbye to the Carolina Panthers, leaving Charlotte as expensive collateral in a blockbuster deal with the Chicago Bears that sets his former team up to select their quarterback of the future at the 2023 NFL Draft in Kansas City.

The Panthers not only coughed up Moore to climb eight spots in the draft order, but also parted with the ninth and 61st picks this year, a first-round pick in 2024 and a second-rounder in 2025. The move allows Carolina to leapfrog QB-needy rivals Houston and Indianapolis, as well as potential dark horses Seattle and Las Vegas, to claim their prize and, having made numerous free agent acquisitions, hopefully position themselves for a first playoff run since 2017.

Having run with Baker Mayfield, Sam Darnold, Matt Corral, Jacob Eason and P.J. Waker last season, the Panthers — now with Frank Reich at the helm — are ready to start anew and, with four diverse prospects — C.J. Stroud, Bryce Young, Will Levis and Anthony Richardson — waiting to hear their names called, have a range of options open to them.

Moore, meanwhile, earns instant WR1 status for Justin Fields in a Chicago team keen to take advantage of a shake-up in the NFC North...

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EDITOR'S NOTES

OLIVER CONNOLLY
MANAGING EDITOR @OllieConnolly

Players are leaping. The takes are flying. Tape-watchers are grinding. Draft season is in full swing!

Ask any evaluator you trust, and they'll come back with a similar answer: there is a confined list of blue-chip, A-plus talent. There is, however, a whole stack of exciting, scheme-specific, B-plus players. The gulf from the 20th player in the class to, say, the 58th is minimal. Most talent evaluators will have somewhere between 16-21 across-the-board first-round grades.

Do you know what that means? Chaos!

When there isn't a consensus on the top-30ish players overall, and a batch of the top players play non-premier positions, you're liable for some eyebrow-scorching picks in the top-10 and beyond. Even now, as you read this, as it seems like a consensus is forming around certain position groups, I'm here to tell you: They will be wrong. Opinions on the most valuable positions (quarterback, corner, edge, offensive tackle) are so all over the place that the person who ranks 6th on Outside Evaluator X's board now could be the sixth pick overall in the draft.

Are you giddy, too? How is this not the best time of the year? Draft picks and cap room can be anything! Even gross overpays in free agency, well, they look okay in April when your team has just added a solid starting linebacker or an okay safety. Who cares about future dead money and flexibility, nerd? We had a hole on our roster and GM-we-will-run-out-of-town-in-two-years filled it! Even the most hapless of organisations can talk themselves into having had a strong offseason ahead of the draft's opening night – and the three months beyond. Yes, even the Raiders.

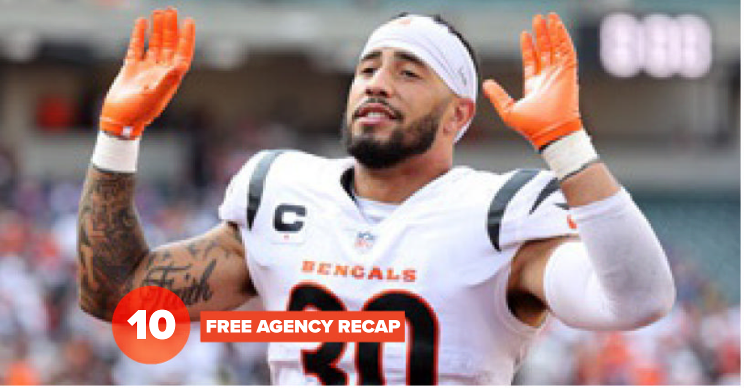
The latest edition of *Gridiron* takes you inside the top storylines from this year's free agent frenzy and will get you up to speed with this year's draft class.

Neil Reynolds looks at the most consequential moves from the free agent and trade markets: The teams who made a bunch of moves; those who did too little; those who stood still. In *Go Long*, Ty Dunne breaks down the inevitable Aaron Rodgers-Packers divorce. It's the end of one era and the start of another. By the end of it all, Rodgers and the Packers were fed up with one another. It was time to move on. But is Jordan Love ready to step into the spotlight?

Elsewhere, Cameron Hogwood takes us inside the world of NFL quality control coaches and, in *Tales From the Bay*, Nicholas McGee looks at how teams with minimal picks can navigate this year's draft.

In our Draft section, we break down the top prospects by position. Mike Carlson scrutinises old draft axioms to see if they still hold up. Oh, and how could I forget: There's a mock draft, too.

Oliver Connolly, *Managing Editor*



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GRIDIRON TIMES

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AGENTS OF CHANGE

NFL free agency got underway with a bang amid a flurry of big name signings as more and more teams appear to be eschewing financial caution in favour of the L.A. Rams 'all in' mentality. These are the biggest names tied down so far…

*(Players listed alphabetically with age, move and contract details; * denotes franchise tag)*

QUARTERBACKS

Jacoby Brissett 30 Browns → Commanders 1yr/$8m

Derek Carr 32 Raiders → Saints 4yr/£150m

Andy Dalton 35 Saints → Panthers 2yr/$11m

Jimmy Garoppolo 31 49ers → Raiders 3yr/$72.75m

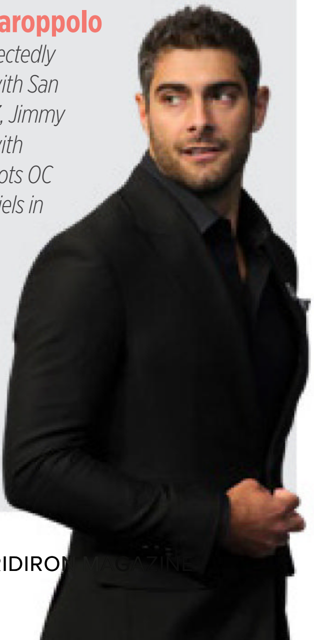
Lamar Jackson 26 Ravens → Ravens*

Daniel Jones 25 Giants → Giants 4yr/$160m

Baker Mayfield 28 Rams → Buccaneers 1yr/$8.5m

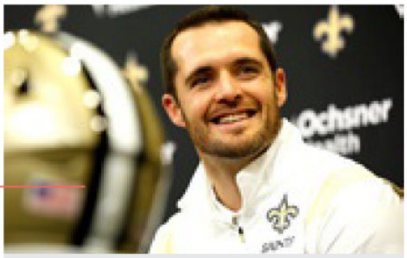
Gardner Minshew 27 Eagles → Colts 1yr $3.5m

Geno Smith 32 Seahawks → Seahawks 3yr/$105m



Jimmy Garoppolo

After unexpectedly remaining with San Fran in 2023, Jimmy G reunites with former Patriots OC Josh McDaniels in Las Vegas.



Derek Carr

The first QB domino to fall, Carr spoke to the Saints while still a Raider, but waited until Vegas had to cancel his contract and moved as a FA rather than by trade.

RUNNING BACKS

Saquon Barkley 26 Giants → Giants*

Damien Harris 26 Patriots → Bills 1yr/$1.7m

Josh Jacobs 25 Raiders → Raiders*

Alexander Mattison 25 Vikings → Vikings 2yr/$7m

David Montgomery 26 Bears → Lions 3yr/$18m

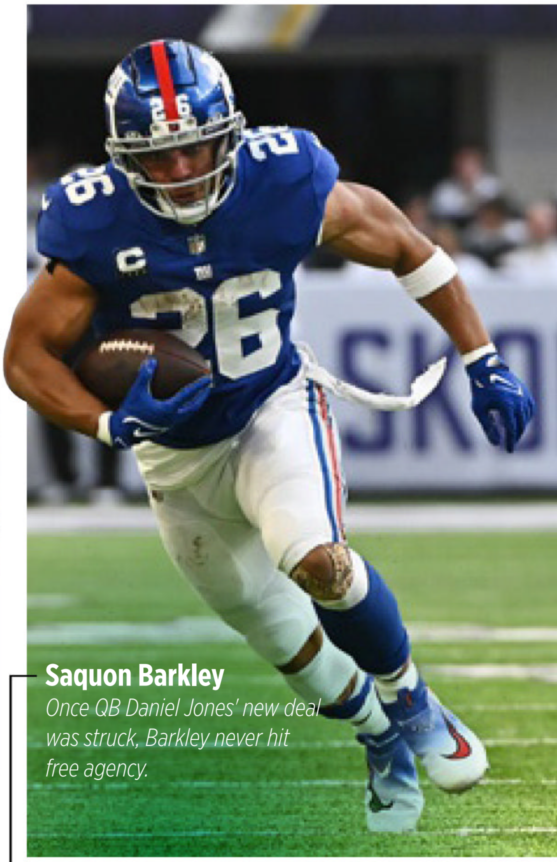
Raheem Mostert 31 Dolphins → Dolphins 2yr/$5.6m

Tony Pollard 25 Cowboys → Cowboys*

Miles Sanders 26 Eagles → Panthers 4yr/$25.4m

Devin Singletary 26 Bills → Texans 1yr/$3.75m

Jamaal Williams 28 Lions → Saints 3yr/$12m

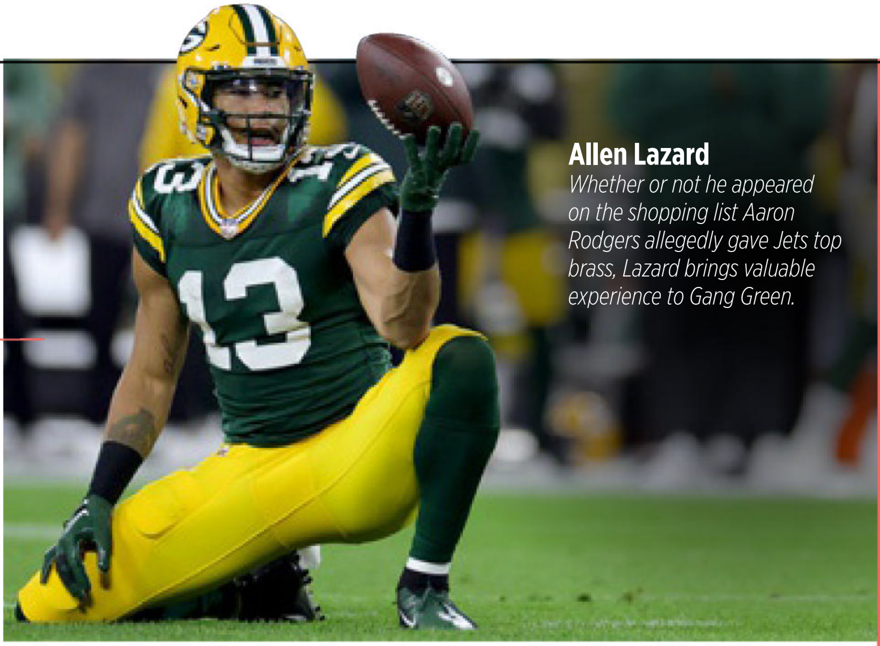


Saquon Barkley

Once QB Daniel Jones' new deal was struck, Barkley never hit free agency.

Jamaal Williams

After leading the league in rushing TDs, with 17, Williams heads to NOLA, claiming the Lions front office made a 'disrespectful' offer. hi'disrespectful' offe



Allen Lazard
Whether or not he appeared on the shopping list Aaron Rodgers allegedly gave Jets top brass, Lazard brings valuable experience to Gang Green.

WIDE RECEIVERS

Nelson Agholor 30 Patriots → Ravens 1yr/$3.25m

Parris Campbell 25 Colts → Giants 1yr/$4.7m

D.J. Chark 26 Lions → Panthers 1yr/$5m

Mecole Hardman 25 Chiefs → Jets 1yr/$4.5m

Mack Hollins 29 Raiders → Falcons 1yr/$2.5m

Allen Lazard 27 Packers → Jets 4yr/$44m

Jakobi Meyers 26 Patriots → Raiders 3yr/$33m

Darius Slayton 26 Giants → Giants 2yr/$12m

JuJu Smith-Schuster 26 Chiefs → Patriots 3yr/$25.5m

Adam Thielen 33 Vikings → Panthers 3yr/$25m.

JuJu Smith-Schuster
Having finally gotten his ring in KC, former Steelers star Smith-Schuster heads back north as a key component in the revival of New England's ailing dynasty.

TIGHT ENDS

Evan Engram 28 Jaguars → Jaguars*

Mike Gesicki 27 Dolphins → Patriots 1yr/$4.5m

Hayden Hurst 30 Bengals → Panthers 3yr/$21.75m

Dalton Schultz 27 Cowboys → Texans 1yr/$9m

Robert Tonyan 29 Packers → Bears 1yr/$2.65m

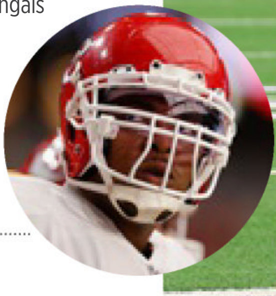
OFFENSIVE LINE

Kelvin Beachum 34 Cardinals → Cardinals 2yr/$5.15m

Bradley Bozeman 28 Panthers → Panthers 3yr/$18m

Garrett Bradbury 28 Vikings → Vikings 3yr/$15.75m

Orlando Brown 27 Chiefs → Bengals 4yr/$64m



Brown moves on after winning his first Lombardi with Kansas City, but gets to continue his streak of protecting MVPs, adding Joe Burrow to Lamar Jackson and Patrick Mahomes.

Nate Davis 26 Titans → Bears 3yr/$30m

Jon Feliciano 31 Giants → 49ers 1yr/$2.25m

STILL ON THE RANK…

Odell Beckham Jr 30 WR
Teddy Bridgewater 30 QB
Frank Clark 30 EDGE
Jadeveon Clowney 30 EDGE
Leonard Floyd 30 EDGE
Poona Ford 27 DL
Shaquill Griffin 28 CB
Justin Houston 34 EDGE
Melvin Ingram 34 EDGE
John Johnson 27 S
Yannick Ngakoue 28 EDGE
Marcus Peters 30 CB
Taylor Rapp 25 S
Dalton Risner 28 OL
Donovan Smith 30 OL
Isaiah Wynn 27 OL
Rock Ya-Sin 27 CB

Dalton Schultz
Schultz stays in state after the Cowboys declined to re-sign him after playing the 2022 on the franchise tag.

Javon Hargrave
Just when you thought the Niners defense couldn't get any more scary, John Lynch and Co snap up one of the league's best interior linemen.

Will Hernandez 27 Cardinals → Cardinals 2yr/$9m

Jason Kelce 35 Eagles → Eagles 1yr/$14.25m

Kaleb McGary 28 Falcons → Falcons 3yr/$34.5m

Mike McGlinchey 28 49ers → Broncos 5yr/$87.5m

Connor McGovern 25 Cowboys → Bills 3yr/$22.35m

Ethan Pocic 28 Browns → Browns 3yr/$18m

Ben Powers 26 Ravens → Broncos 4yr/$52m

Isaac Seumalo 29 Eagles → Steelers 3yr/$24m

Jawaan Taylor 25 Jaguars → Chiefs 4yr/$80m

Andrew Wylie 29 Chiefs → Commanders 3yr/$24m

DEFENSIVE LINE

Zach Allen 26 Cardinals → Broncos 3yr/$45.75m

Fletcher Cox 32 Eagles → Eagles 1yr/$10m

Greg Gaines 27 Rams → Buccaneers 1yr/$3.5m

Brandon Graham 35 Eagles → Eagles 1yr/$5m

Javon Hargrave 30 Eagles → 49ers 4yr/$84m

Dre'Mont Jones 26 Broncos → Seahawks 3yr/$51.53m

Larry Ogunjobi 29 Steelers → Steelers 3yr/$28.75m

Ogbo Okoronkwo 28 Rams → Browns 3yr/$19m

Charles Omenihu 26 Texans → Chiefs 2yr/$16m

David Onyemata 30 Saints → Falcons 3yr/$35m

Daron Payne 25 Commanders → Commanders*

Sheldon Rankins 29 Jets → Texans 1yr/$10.5m

Dalvin Tomlinson 29 Vikings → Browns 4yr/$57m

EDGE RUSHERS

Marcus Davenport 27 Saints → Vikings 1yr/$13m

Samson Ebukam 28 49ers → Colts 3yr/$27m

Arden Key 27 Jaguars → Titans 3yr/$21m

Andrew Van Ginkel 28 Dolphins → Dolphins 1yr/$2.65m

LINEBACKERS

Azeez Al-Shaair 26 49ers → Titans 1yr/$5m

Alex Anzalone Lions → Lions 3yr/$18.75m

Lavonte David 33 Buccaneers → Buccaneers 1yr/$7m

Tremaine Edmunds 25 Bills → Bears 4yr/$72m

T.J. Edwards 27 Eagles → Bears 3yr/$19.5m

Kaden Elliss 28 Saints → Falcons 3yr/$21.5m

Cole Holcomb 27 Commanders → Steelers 3yr/$18m

David Long 26 Titans → Dolphins 2yr/$11m

Bobby Okereke 27 Colts → Giants 4yr/$40m

Denzel Perryman 30 Raiders → Texans 1yr/$3.5m

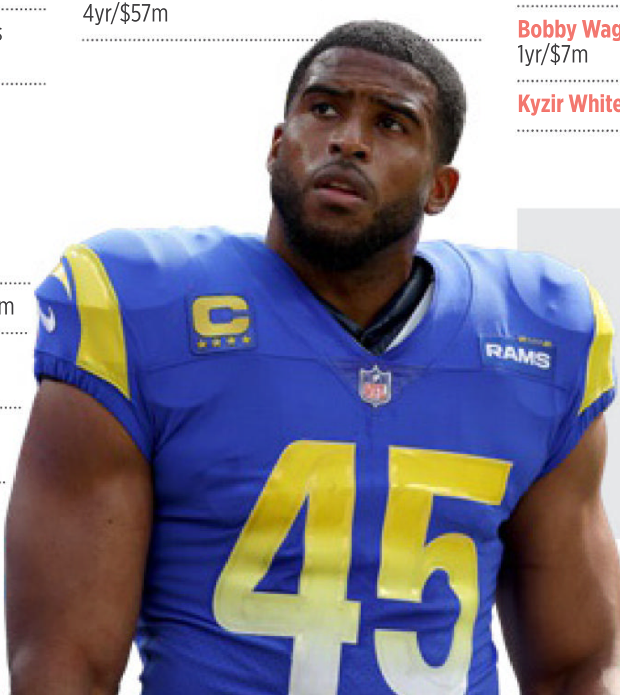
Germaine Pratt 27 Bengals → Bengals 3yr/$21m

Drue Tranquill 28 Chargers → Chiefs 1yr/$3m

Leighton Vander Esch 27 Cowboys → Cowboys 2yr/$11m

Bobby Wagner 33 Rams → Seahawks 1yr/$7m

Kyzir White 27 Eagles → Cardinals 2yr/$10m



Bobby Wagner
One year after being eased out of the Pacific Northwest, Wagner is back in a Seahawks uniform.

CORNERBACKS

James Bradberry 30 Eagles → Eagles 3yr/$38m

Jamel Dean 26 Buccaneers → Buccaneers 4yr/$52m

Jonathan Jones 29 Patriots → Patriots 2yr/$20m

Emmanuel Moseley 27 49ers → Lions 1yr/$6m

Byron Murphy 25 Cardinals → Vikings 2yr/$22m

Sean Murphy-Bunting 25 Buccaneers → Titans 1yr/$3.5m

Patrick Peterson 33 Vikings → Steelers 2yr/$14m

Cameron Sutton 28 Steelers → Lions 3yr/$33m

Jimmie Ward 32 49ers → Texans 2yr/$13m

SAFETIES

Jessie Bates 26 Bengals → Falcons 4yr/$64m

Vonn Bell 28 Bengals → Panthers 3yr/$22.5m

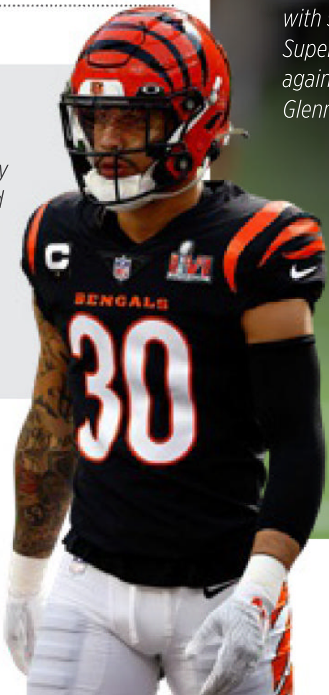
Julian Love 25 Giants → Seahawks 2yr/$12m

Jordan Poyer 32 Bills → Bills 2yr/$12.5m

Chauncey Gardner-Johnson 25 Eagles → Lions 1yr/$8m

Juan Thornhill 27 Chiefs → Browns 3yr/$21m

Donovan Wilson 28 Cowboys → Cowboys 3yr/$24m



Jessie Bates
Atlanta immediately upgrades its defense by prising the under-rated Bates out of Cincinnati, a year after he played on the franchise tag.

James Bradberry
Infamous, and self-confessed, Super Bowl penalty notwithstanding, Bradberry lands a multi-year deal to stay in Philly.

TRADING PLACES

Chuck Clark 27 Safety
Ravens → Jets

Brandin Cooks 29 Wide Receiver
Texans → Cowboys

Stephon Gilmore 32 Cornerback
Colts → Cowboys

Hunter Long 24 TE
Dolphins → Rams

Shaq Mason 29 Guard
Buccaneers → Texans

D.J. Moore 25 Wide Receiver
Panthers → Bears

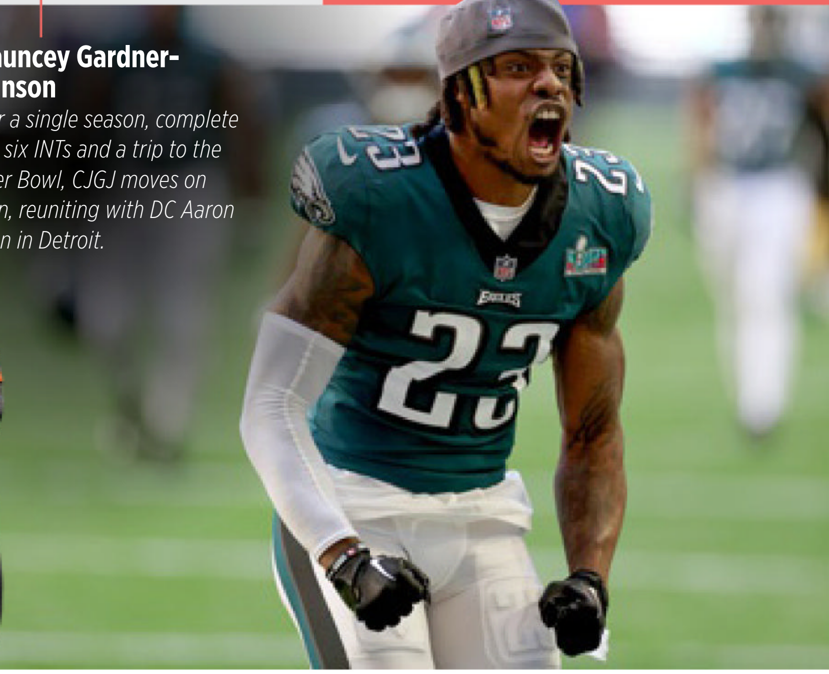
Elijah Moore 23 Wide Receiver
Jets → Browns

Jalen Ramsey 28 Cornerback
Rams → Dolphins

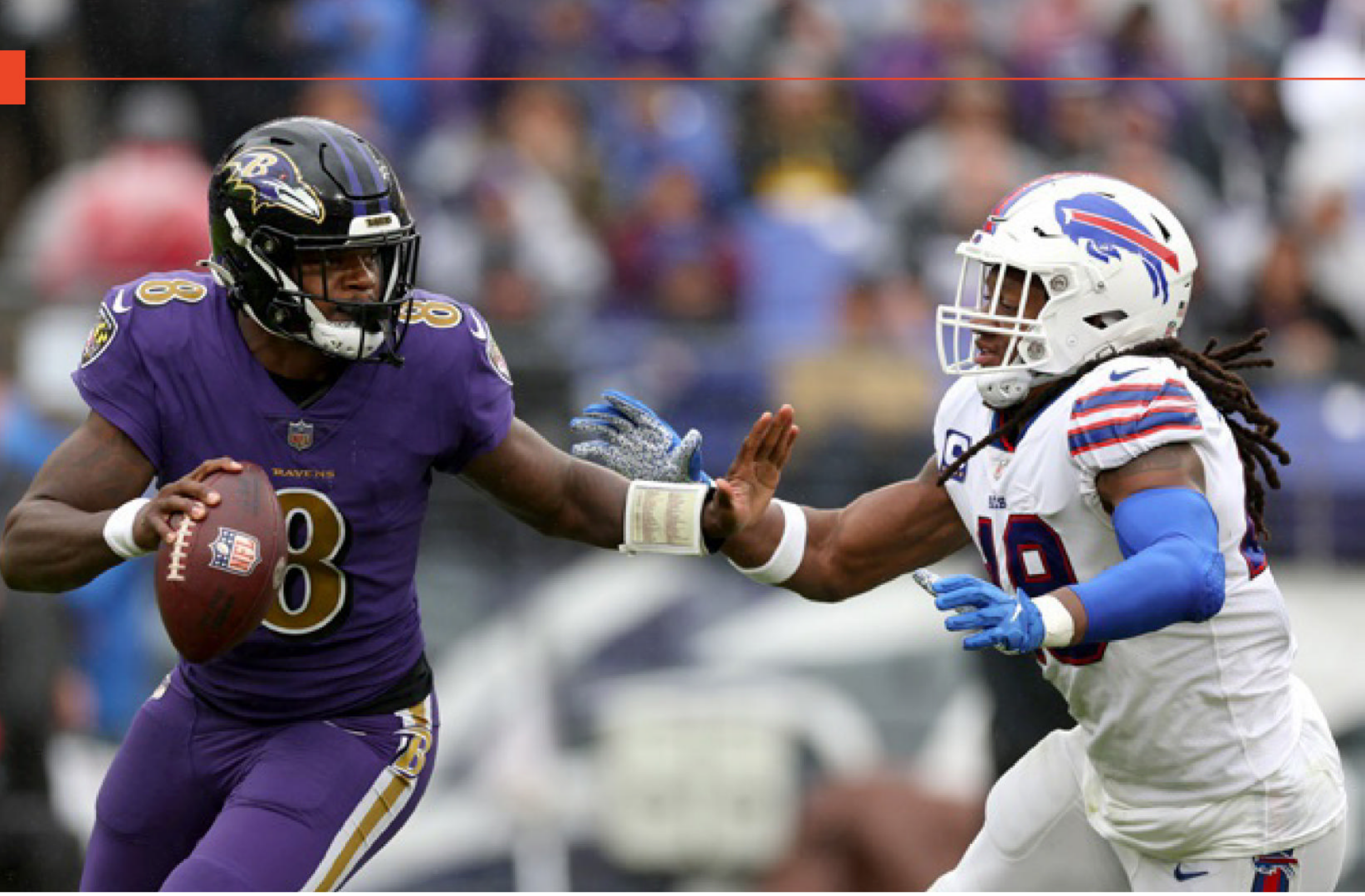
Jonnu Smith 27 Tight End
Patriots → Falcons

Darren Waller 30 Tight End
Raiders → Giants

....and **Aaron Rodgers** Quarterback
Packers → Jets (PENDING)



Chauncey Gardner-Johnson
After a single season, complete with six INTs and a trip to the Super Bowl, CJGJ moves on again, reuniting with DC Aaron Glenn in Detroit.



FREE AGENCY WINNERS & LOSERS

The annual NFL transfer window has the ability to shape the future of all 32 franchises — for better or worse — so who improved their lot and who didn't?

NEIL REYNOLDS
CONTRIBUTOR
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This was not supposed to be a stellar free agency group, but that didn't stop NFL teams from moving quickly to snap up the available out-of-contract talent in the middle of March. It was the usual free-for-all.

Teams splashed huge amounts of cash, although that can often be 'funny money' which never gets fully acquired by the newly signed players. Linebacker Bobby Wagner is a perfect example – he signed a five-year deal with the Los Angeles Rams in 2022 that was worth up to $50million. And yet he was released after just one season in California and now finds himself back in Seattle.

So, when assessing some free agency winners and losers here; I'm not going to get too deep into the finances. I'm looking at which teams significantly improved their chances in 2023 and where other clubs might have stood still or taken steps in the wrong direction.

While some purists turn their noses up at free agency, we have to acknowledge that this is a vital – albeit sometimes risky – way to strengthen a roster. The last two big spenders in free agency – New England in 2021 and Jacksonville in 2022 – made the playoffs in those seasons. Nine of the 11 starters on Philadelphia's Super Bowl defense came either via free agency or trade. So, it is important.

Though this is technically an article about free agency, trades also must be factored in when assessing the winners and losers, with the aforementioned Eagles perhaps surprisingly among the former.

WINNERS

PHILADELPHIA EAGLES

I could have started with an easy one like the Chicago Bears or the Carolina Panthers, but I wanted to highlight the Eagles; who are now the poster child for how hard it is to keep the band together when a young quarterback (Jalen Hurts, in this case) is about to sign a big-money deal.

The Eagles went into free agency with a laundry list of players available to be grabbed by other teams. They did indeed lose a lot in the form of running back Miles Sanders, guard Isaac Seumalo, defensive tackle Javon Hargrave, linebackers T.J. Edwards and Kyzir White; and safety C.J. Gardner-Johnson. And yet I still think they're okay and capable of making another Super Bowl run in 2023. I believe in general manager Howie Roseman and I definitely believe in Hurts.

Boston Scott was re-signed at running back and is joined in the backfield by Rashaad Penny, who was dynamic and explosive when healthy in Seattle. I'm fascinated to see how he can exploit defenses that focus heavily on stopping Hurts. Veterans were also re-signed in center Jason Kelce, defensive linemen Brandon Graham and Fletcher Cox; and defensive backs James Bradberry and Darius Slay.

Interestingly, the Eagles invested in keeping their 30-somethings around and letting younger players walk. We'll see if that approach pays off but clearly Kelce, Graham, Cox and Slay bring leadership on and off the field. Philadelphia were up against it heading into free agency and I think they avoided a disaster. That just about makes them winners, in my book!

BELOW: The Eagles didn't suffer as many losses on defense as anticipated.

CHICAGO BEARS

The Bears won just three games in 2022, making a mockery of the opening statement delivered by general manager Ryan Poles at his introductory press conference. He stated that the Bears were "taking the North and not giving it back." While those bold words didn't come to fruition last year, the future is certainly brighter in Chicago following the past month of transactions.

First, the Bears gave up the top pick in the 2023 NFL Draft in exchange for Carolina's first and second-round selections this year, their first-rounder in 2024, their second-rounder in 2025 and 25-year-old wide receiver D.J. Moore, who already has two 1,000-yard receiving seasons in the NFL. That was a good start.

The Bears had the most money to spend in the league and were not shy about using it. Free agency brought a needed addition along the offensive line in the form of Tennessee guard Nate Davis, a nice edge rusher in DeMarcus Walker, who recorded seven sacks for the Titans in 2022 and a pair of tackling-machine linebackers in T.J. Edwards (he had 159 stops with the Eagles last season) and Tremaine Edmunds, who had 565 tackles in five seasons in Buffalo. We can talk all we want about money spent on this pair (it could go to more than $90m) but the Bears could not stop the run last season, allowing 157 yards per game and ranking 31st in rushing defense while conceding a league-high 31 rushing touchdowns.

I also liked the additions of running back D'Onta Foreman and tight end Robert Tonyan. Those were not dramatic, headline-making signings; but they subtly improve an offense that simply has to be better around Justin Fields in 2023. And the Bears still have the draft to come.

CAROLINA PANTHERS

The next team on my list is now the proud owner of the first overall selection in the 2023 NFL Draft, so a franchise quarterback will soon be setting up camp in Charlotte. The Panthers may have not set the world on fire, but they have made some sensible offensive additions.

Andy Dalton is a safe pair of hands as the veteran quarterback on board, Adam Thielen and D.J. Chark upgrade a receiving corps that was in dire need of help and tight end Hayden Hurst is coming off a very decent season in Cincinnati. Throw in the re-signing of center Bradley Bozeman and the addition of Miles Sanders and a promising offense awaits whichever rookie hears his name called first on opening night in Kansas City.

In a division that is very much up for grabs in 2023, the Panthers made enough moves to be in consideration. I'm starting to feel the same way about the next team on my list, although I wish they had been more aggressive in going after Lamar Jackson.

ATLANTA FALCONS

Like Chicago, the Falcons had plenty of money to spend in free agency and they did not sit on their hands and watch the best talent get snapped up by others. They very much got involved, starting with the re-signing of a couple of their own players in guard Chris Lindstrom and tackle Kaleb McGary. I always think it is an encouraging sign when a team has salary cap money to play with and they re-invest it in key guys who have already been in their locker room for a while. You know what your money is being spent on.

But then Atlanta did venture outside their building and with good success, adding defensive lineman David Onyemata and linebacker Kaden Elliss, both from New Orleans; before pulling off one of the coups of free agency in the addition of All-Pro safety Jessie Bates, who was a star for Cincinnati.

Quarterback Taylor Heinicke is an intriguing and cheap option if Desmond Ridder doesn't pan out and I wonder if Jonnu Smith will get re-born under Arthur Smith after a dreadful stay in New England? Mack Hollins can still play at wide receiver. The Falcons have improved their roster, but do they have their franchise quarterback on board? That is my only nagging doubt as we head into April.

THE BEST OF THE REST

- I loved San Francisco adding to their defensive line with the signing of Javon Hargave, weakening the Eagles in the process. Nick Bosa off the edge and Hargrave up the middle? Yes please! I also didn't mind the addition of Sam Darnold as quarterbacks Trey Lance and Brock Purdy battle back to health.

- This is not free agency, I know, but I loved the Cowboys giving up just a fifth-round pick in 2023 and a sixth-rounder in 2024 to acquire Houston wide receiver Brandin Cooks. With six 1,000-yard seasons to his name, the well-travelled Cooks still brings much-needed juice to the passing attack. The trade for All-Pro cornerback Stephon Gilmore was also sneaky good.

- When they eventually land their big fish in Aaron Rodgers, the Jets will be sitting pretty heading into 2023, so long as they don't give up a first-rounder for the 39-year-old. I believe Rodgers can still play and I don't care if we call it advice, a list of demands or a ransom note, it makes total sense to make an incoming quarterback happy. Allen Lazard and Mecole Hardman are fascinating additions to play alongside Garrett Wilson. If and when Rodgers does come on board, I expect the Jets to add a few more receiving targets to the mix. Odell Beckham Jr. anyone?

ABOVE: Lamar Jackson and the Ravens remain in a stand-off.

LOSERS

BALTIMORE RAVENS

At the time of writing, Lamar Jackson's future with the Ravens remains very much up in the air and the contract saga is clearly having a negative impact on the AFC North club.

Even if no other team signs Lamar to an offer sheet, what kind of mood will he be in when he returns to the Ravens and is likely forced to play under the franchise tag in 2023? It's fair to suggest he may still be quite disgruntled.

And the uncertainty surrounding Lamar has directly influenced the Ravens' ability to build around him. The Ravens don't know how much money they need to put aside for their star quarterback and they're hardly an attractive proposition for players looking for a new team right now.

The Ravens headed into free agency needing to upgrade a passing attack that ranked 28th in the NFL in 2022. The only addition in that area has been the signing of perennially disappointing wide receiver Nelson Agholor to a one-year deal. Add in the release of veteran defensive lineman Calais Campbell and it's been a rough few weeks for the Ravens and their fans.

THE FREE AGENCY REFUSERS

Why do the Green Bay Packers and, to a slightly lesser degree, the Indianapolis Colts rarely participate as major players in free agency? As I mentioned at the top, I think you have to make moves at this time of the year in order to stay competitive. Believing you can solve all your problems in the NFL Draft is an antiquated and incorrect assessment.

Yet Brian Gutekunst, general manager of the Packers, barely glanced up from his Aaron Rodgers/New York Jets negotiations to acknowledge free agency. Believe me, Green Bay needed to do a lot more than simply re-signing kick returner Keisean Nixon.

It is the same for the Colts, who can't even use the excuse that they are about to pay big bucks for their franchise quarterback. Unless they know some Lamar Jackson news that the rest of us are about to find out!

Indianapolis are not a bad team. They could be a very good team, especially if they solve their long-standing quarterback issue in the draft. But general manager Chris Ballard has to be brave enough to jump off the diving board and into the deep end of free agency. At the moment, he's paddling around in the shallow end, signing the likes of wide receiver Isaiah McKenzie and edge rusher Samson Ebukam.

Ballard will speak about a patient approach and doing things the right way and in a sustainable manner. But such a philosophy has failed to bring silverware – or consistent success - to Indianapolis in recent years, so why not roll the dice a little more and try a different approach?

RUNNING BACKS

This is a position that is seemingly increasingly de-valued with each passing season. Teams are just not willing to invest big bucks in veteran rushers when younger ones can come off the college football production line and excel at half the price for a few years.

The fact that Isiah Pacheco was one of the most important players on the field in the closing stages of Super Bowl 57 hurts the veteran running backs clinging to jobs around the league. Pacheco was a seventh-round draft choice of the Kansas City Chiefs in 2022.

In the last few weeks, we have seen three-time Pro Bowler Ezekiel Elliott cast aside by the Dallas Cowboys and Austin Ekeler – scorer of 38 touchdowns in the past two seasons – granted permission to seek a trade away from the Los Angeles Chargers. So, reputations mean nothing when it comes to running backs. On that front, don't be surprised to see a draft-day move for Titans running back Derrick Henry.

Ekeler is unlikely to receive the big money he seeks. It's just not being invested in running backs across the league. Miami re-signed their two lead backs – Raheem Mostert and Jeff Wilson – very cheaply. Wilson got two years for $6m and Mostert two years for $5.6m. Damien Harris signed a one-year deal with Buffalo that was worth just $1.77m. So, you can see the trend.

Meanwhile, Sanders' career-year, in which he rushed for 1,269 yards and 11 touchdowns, only earned him a four-year deal worth just $25.4m. It's not chump change, but it's nothing when you compare it to what quarterbacks, wide receivers and offensive tackles are getting paid.

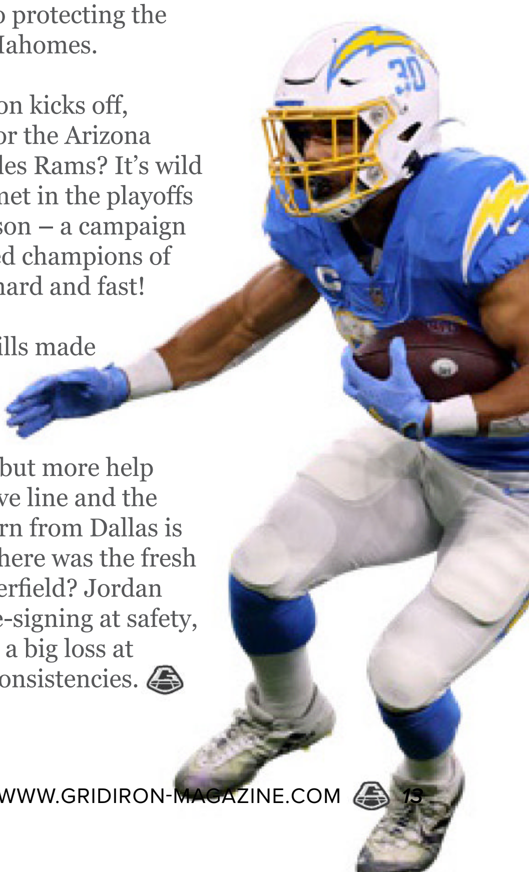
THE NOT-SO-BEST OF THE REST

- Did the Kansas City Chiefs really upgrade their offensive line by allowing tackles Andrew Wylie and Orlando Brown to walk in free agency, replacing the latter with Jacksonville's Jawaan Taylor? Brown should instantly upgrade a Super Bowl rival in Cincinnati. I think there are some concerns here now when it comes to protecting the edges in front of Patrick Mahomes.

- By the time the 2023 season kicks off, will anyone want to play for the Arizona Cardinals or the Los Angeles Rams? It's wild to think these two teams met in the playoffs at the end of the 2021 season – a campaign that saw the Rams crowned champions of the NFL. Both are falling hard and fast!

- I'm not sure the Buffalo Bills made enough moves to alleviate some of the pressure on quarterback Josh Allen. I like the Harris addition, but more help was needed on the offensive line and the arrival of Connor McGovern from Dallas is no reason for a parade. Where was the fresh help at receiver? Trent Sherfield? Jordan Poyer was an important re-signing at safety, but Tremaine Edmunds is a big loss at linebacker, despite his inconsistencies.

BELOW: Austin Ekeler wants out of Los Angeles.



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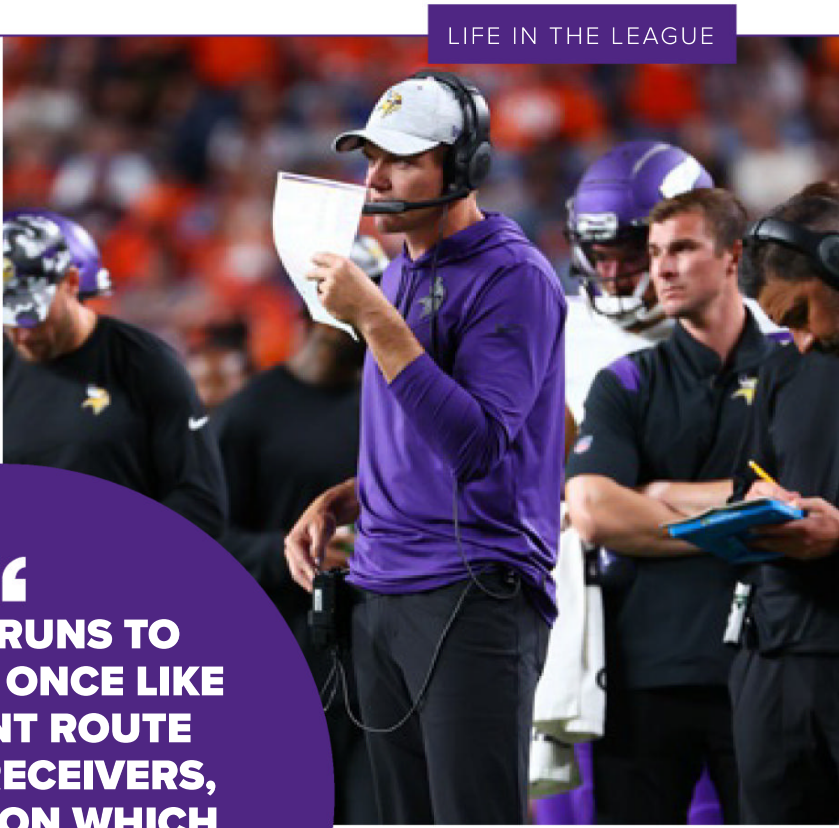
QUALITY STREET

Quality control might sound like it belongs in manufacturing, but it has rapidly become a vital cog amongst NFL coaching staffs.



“Going to get the coffees isn’t really a thing that happens anymore, that side of it is kind of old school,” says Derron Montgomery, the accompanying smile a nod to coaching mythology. He knows it wasn’t always this way.

Ron Rivera would dash in first thing in the morning to make the coffees before checking the pots were clean, gunk-free and switched off last thing at night during his time as Chicago Bears quality control coach; Brian Daboll would make copies and run the scout team while learning the ways of Bill Belichick in New England; when the copier machine broke in Houston, Robert Saleh would whip out the instruction manual and work out how to fix it himself as a quality control coach with the Texans; Nathaniel Hackett would transfer and organise thousands of Jon Gruden’s plays into a new, digital format as a native of the new technology-driven era; Sean McVay would laminate then-offensive coordinator Kyle Shanahan’s playsheet on rainy game days during their time together in Washington; Gruden’s own education under Mike Holmgren in San Francisco would entail anything from personnel analysis to coffee-making, 18-hour days or sleeping in his office at the facility overnight not uncommon.

Coffee runs to QCs were once like the slant route to wide receivers, the base on which everything was built. Things are evolving a little these days. Being a quality control coach is the first rung on the league’s coaching ladder. You can scan across the league to find former QCs-with-a-dream who have graduated to head honcho status at multiple franchises. As the league has become (slightly) more sophisticated, the role of a quality control coach has evolved. Where they once functioned as a glorified Post Mates before the app, youngsters grabbing food and drink for ornery higher-ups, now it’s progressed into the ultimate fly-on-the-wall gig, credited with producing the geekiest and most respected football minds in the room.

> “
> **COFFEE RUNS TO QCS WERE ONCE LIKE THE SLANT ROUTE TO WIDE RECEIVERS, THE BASE ON WHICH EVERYTHING WAS BUILT. THINGS ARE EVOLVING A LITTLE THESE DAYS.**

ABOVE: Vikings' head coach Kevin O'Connell empowers his QC coaches.

LEFT: Derron Montgomery (right).

* * *

Montgomery just closed out his first season in the NFL as offensive quality control coach of the Minnesota Vikings, where backroom brainiac meets on-field sculptor in the modern age of the practical and theoretical ‘QC’. Being a QC is a breeding ground for the next generation of coaches — where coaches go not just to learn or hone their craft, but where now, more than ever, they start to shape their own philosophy on how the game should be played and the building should be run.

“Coach [Kevin] O’Connell told me in the interview process that ‘I’m bringing you up here to be a coach, to help develop you as a coach, you’re coming up here to coach and really be involved with this’,” Montgomery said. “The fact that he gives me the opportunity to be really hands-on with everything, I couldn’t ask to be in a better situation to be honest with you. There are grinds obviously, but I wouldn’t say there’s any part of it where I would say ‘man I could do without this’. I’m in such a great situation.”

The job demands meticulous attention to detail and, in return, breeds schematic

CAMERON HOGWOOD

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omniscience; Montgomery is a researcher and runner, illustrator and instructor, the paid-to-be know-it-all with his nose willingly in every team's business. He gets his hands dirty on the practice field alongside experienced running backs coach Curtis Modkins, and puts on his football forensic hat as a source of intel on every scheme, and their intricacies, across the league. He tracks trends and specifics, charts tendencies and philosophies — for the Vikings, their opponents, and the league at large.

"The whole quality control position is behind the scenes. It is the drawings of the plays that we come up with every single week, a lot of which we do on the Microsoft Visio system," he explains. "It's the data input where we're watching film on certain opponents and we have to go in and type in certain information we see on the film, whether it's their defensive looks or whether it's the certain data of how we want to categorise everything, how we want to call certain plays so that, when we're pulling up film, it's easy for us to search for something. Whether we want to search for all the 11 personnel or all the 21 personnel or all the 2x2 formations, we try to put it into terms of what we call 'our plays'.

"We'll break down an opponent and whoever, say the Chicago Bears, are playing, say it's the Buffalo Bills, where we're watching the Bears defense against the Bills offense, I'm looking at the Bills offense, seeing a play they run and I type in the system what that formation is, what that play is, what they're doing in our verbiage, what it would be in our system. So now you kind of get an idea of what works or what wouldn't, we go through every single game of the season and go back in and type in that data and then we go back and research that stuff. That's one of the big parts of what has to be done ahead of time working on opponents."

As the Vikings were preparing to face the Green Bay Packers in Week 17, Montgomery was already countless coffees deep into planning for the Bears in Week 18. As the Vikings were preparing to face the Bears in Week 18, Montgomery was planning for any and every playoff eventuality with Minnesota's postseason opponent still to be confirmed, be it the blitz flamboyance, tendencies and situational efficiency of Wink Martindale's New York Giants defense or the run-blunting explosiveness and range of De'Vondre Campbell and Quay Walker at the heart of the Green Bay Packers linebacker unit.

ABOVE: Sean McVay and Kyle Shanahan started out as QC 'grunts'.

"Everything has to be done. You can't sit around and wait, it has to be done way ahead of time so, once that week comes around, you're ready to go and jump into the next opponent," he says. "You have to have your write-ups ready to go, your notes on everything, all of your different ideas ready to go so, once you've put that game behind you, you're ready to move on to the next.

"That's probably the biggest thing I would say, having all the information ready for when that week comes. If you don't have that ready you put everybody on the staff behind because they have to wait for you to get your job done.

* * *

The job is part planner, part illustrator. "The other side of it is the drawings," Montgomery says. "We meet as a staff and come up with certain plays we like going into the game, and then have to draw those plays up so the players can see what the plays are."

The drawings of today differ from the drawings of yesterday; behold the world of technology. Out are the old, giant playbooks. Welcome to the world of tablets. Today's Visio is yesterday's SuperPaint, the latter of which Shanahan would use to sketch receiver routes while working under his father Mike.

"You can draw it up on the board all you want, but guys like to have visuals to take home with them, they like a playbook," Montgomery explains. "So whatever plays we come up with — our assistant receiver coach does the pass game drawings, our assistant O-line coach does the protection drawings and then I'll do the run-game drawings so it's split up amongst us — we upload those onto the system and the players have those drawings, have those visuals, on their iPads ready to go. That's the thing, you have to be very detailed on your drawings. The players are studying this stuff so, if something is wrong on there and they go out and do the wrong thing, they can say 'well the drawing was this' and now that's a bad reflection on you.

"You have to take pride in the drawings you're doing, this is their job and they want to make sure they're getting the right information. We have to make sure we're very detailed, very neat, not sloppy and not throwing something together, so you put notes on there as well."

Montgomery, who works directly with the Vikings running backs, will finish drawing up the plans for Dalvin Cook and hand them over to offensive line coach Chris Cooper, who will go in and make annotations of corrections Montgomery must make before re-uploading it for the players to access and study.

That Montgomery has the time at all to sit down for an interview is a wonder. The term 'grunt work' is thrown around for good reason, but ask any QC in the league and few would have it any different. "Tuesdays are roughly the toughest days, those are the days when a lot of the game-planning is going on," explains Montgomery. "Tuesday, we're typically in around 6.30am and can be here until 2am sometimes that night. It's not all just drawing, but a lot of meetings, game-planning, film study, conversations, making sure everybody is on the same page. Then, at the end, once we're done in all the meetings and have figured out what we want to do, that's when I get started on the drawings.

"I have to have them done by the next day when the players are coming in. If that takes me having to stay up here until 2am or 3am, then that's what it has to be. It's what's asked of me, I know what I'm going into and that's what I want to do. I'm learning more by doing all of that."

> "THE MOMENT YOU FEEL LIKE YOU KNOW EVERYTHING AND HAVE DONE EVERYTHING IS THE MOMENT YOU NEED TO GET OUT OF COACHING

Grunt work, by its definition, can sound gruelling. But, in the new age of fewer coffee runs and more playbook responsibilities and on-field coaching, it's effective. It offers a crash course to a new coach, and allows them to have a full understanding of a team's philosophy — both the one they work for and the opponents they're scouting.

'Padding', the act of charting plays and inputting them into a team's internal system, strips away the what and forces a young coach to focus on the why. Rather than focusing single-mindedly on the mechanics of one position, they get a holistic view of what a unit is trying to do as a collective. "Me being the one having to draw these plays, I know them inside and out: I know what the receiver's responsibility is, the left guard's responsibility is, the tight end's responsibility, the center," Montgomery says. "I was the one who sat there, drew it and got the corrections or notes from the O-line or receivers coach. They are long days and it's a grind, but it's rewarding because I have such a great feel for this system."

Want to know how the bleep to stop Justin Jefferson (if it's possible) on third down? Best to give Montgomery a call.

* * *

Sleep-deprived weeks come with game-time pressure and exposure on a Sunday as Montgomery straps on the headset and engages in constant communication with the rest of the Vikings staff, primed to distribute every nugget of information he has acquired throughout the season: When does Gus Bradley go to his Big Nickel look with the Indianapolis Colts defense — and why? When do Saleh and Jeff Ulbrich jump into their three linebacker looks with the New York Jets — and why? How do the Washington Commanders set up as the best third-down defense in the league?

Montgomery's job is to be equipped with the answers and to concisely communicate it up the chain of command. "Going into the game you kind of have a good idea of where you want to go with certain directions, there are things you adjust to on the fly and certain things that happen you didn't expect to happen, that happens every single game," he notes. "You go into the game with all the information you have from film study so, whenever these situations come up in a game, you know what to expect or 'hey, in this down and distance, they like to do this, so let's go to this play' that we know can work against what we're expecting them to do. Is that always the case? No, but you have an idea going into it."

During short weeks, he will average around three hours sleep per night when the Vikings are playing Sunday straight into Thursday. It only adds to the task of deciphering a Bill Belichick-Jared Mayo defense. *Why does Mayo keep rocking and rolling his safeties vs. certain bunch sets and not others?* More Red Bull. *How do we break down their double-the-slot stuff when Jefferson goes inside?* More Red Bull. *They're fast-fitting everything with one early plugger from depth and allowing one of their slender 'backers to roll over the top, can we catch them overpursuing?* More Red Bull.

The Vikings were 33-26 winners when the sides met on Thanksgiving this season — three-hour sleeps rewarded.

Learning curves are steep for coaches in year one. As 'Welcome To The League' moments go, they don't come much bigger than when the Vikings conjured the largest comeback in league history to beat the Colts 39-36 in overtime after trailing 33-0 midway through the third quarter.

All planning and probability were blurred. Montgomery encapsulated the definition of 'working on the fly' as he and his fellow Vikings coaches ditched their pre-game plan. Minnesota tied the game up for the first time since kickoff at 36-36 with 2:15 to play in the fourth, recognising the Colts' retreat into a two-high shell while playing soft man coverage to eradicate the Jefferson chunk shot, and going empty backfield to dial up a Cook screen behind on which he would bob and weave his way to a 64-yard touchdown, teeing up the two-point conversion.

BELOW: Kirk Cousins works during the Vikings' historic comeback.

"I would say the biggest thing I've learned is just how serious everybody takes everything on this level, serious like when we're down 33-0 with little over eight minutes left in the third quarter and how everybody on the sideline had no doubt we were going to come back and win that game," he says. "Every single player in their mindset was like 'we're good, we're good, we'll handle this'.

"You admire seeing a guy like Dalvin Cook, who comes to practice every day and just grinds, Justin Jefferson, Kirk Cousins, all these guys come in and work hard. Adam Thielen runs around like he's still a 23-year-old kid trying to make a team. To see that makes you want to work harder, when you see Dalvin Cook in a practice rep taking a handoff 60-70 yards instead of 10-15 yards and turning around."

* * *

In helping O'Connell execute his own vision with the Vikings, Montgomery, like every quality control coach before him, is effectively piecing together his own playbook in view of climbing the ladder.

He arrived in Minneapolis following his time as a senior offensive analyst for the University of Arizona, featuring as part of a decade in the college system that began as a student assistant with Abilene Christian in 2010.

"You're always looking to learn something and build ideas and build your own deal as things are going on over time," he said. "The moment you feel like you know everything and have done everything is the moment you need to get out of coaching, you need to continue to get better and improve your game. This is my first year in the NFL, I've spent the last 10 years on the college level, but every year I've learned something that I want to do when I get to that highest level of it."

Coffee runs may be a quirk of the past, but that isn't to say Montgomery can't relate to the traditional assistant's tussles with tediousness on his journey through the ranks, at the end of which he might even have his own quality control coach. It is a journey that also tends to pick up friends for the ride, such is the construction of an ever-branching coaching tree.

"I would have to make food runs as a graduate assistant fresh out of college at the University of Miami, as I was the youngest member of the staff at 23," he recalled. "Our Vikings QBs

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ABOVE: Chris O'Hara (left), another QC coach working up the league's ladder.

coach, Chris O'Hara, was an undergrad student assistant coach at the University of Miami at the time, that's where me and him met and became really close friends. Then he graduated and became a graduate assistant with me before going on to the Jacksonville Jaguars and starting his NFL career. Me and O'Hara used to make food runs together, going to the corner store and grabbing sandwiches and coming back with bags and drinks. We didn't mind it though. We look back on it and joke about it now because, at the time, we were just happy to be in the situation we were in and blessed to be at the university we were at. If we had to do a little extra like food or airport runs, I'm going to do it."

Food runs helped get him here. 'Here' being lending his knowledge to one of the league's most potent offenses.

He is sure to point out, though, that the food runs did not come while volunteering with his father Wilbert Montgomery, who would employ the help of Derron on an intern-type deal in training camp during his spells as running backs coach for the Baltimore Ravens and Cleveland Browns.

The quality control post stakes a claim as the most gloriously-nerdy position in coaching, made for the football purists and responsible for the most polished and conscientious schematic brains in the game. It is both physically and mentally taxing, a test of one's ability to temper ambition with patience, a boulder in the way of work-life balance, a tremendously-pressured domino staring at the risk of catalytic disarray with one mishap. It is also a dream suffocation of all things football from groundwork to execution, among Montgomery's favorite aspects being the chance to witness young players grow into their lives at the highest level. Just as he is.

The mastery of Xs and Os can earn a coach an edge, but the ability to convey, manage and empathise remains a defining factor too. For all his tactical acumen, Montgomery is tuned in to the humans behind the visors.

"What's really stood out to me about them is how humble so many of these guys are, everybody on this team," he says. "So many of these guys are the most humble people I've ever met and they are these superstars people look up to. They can act certain ways, but they respect everybody.

"To see Justin Jefferson running around and giving autographs to everybody he sees after staying out there an additional 30 or 40 minutes after practice; Dalvin Cook as well, spending the extra time when they could have gone inside and got dressed and left. Us coaches will go inside, we'll shower, look out the window and Justin Jefferson is still out there signing autographs — he's the best receiver in the game, so to see him do that is really awesome. That means a lot to me, and I think it's something that's really special."

It all plays a part in justifying the sacrifices Montgomery must make as he strives to climb up the league's ladder. "You're not always going to be around family on holiday, you're not going to always have that free time to hang out. We work seven days a week. There are times you want to try to catch up on some sleep, you don't have a social life, you're travelling every other weekend so you don't have those true down times where you can just go and be with family members. That's what I would say is the toughest part about the whole deal but, again, it makes it easy when you have family and friends that are so supportive. They don't mind me not being around for holidays or birthdays, they're happy that I'm out here fulfilling my dreams and reaching my goals."

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LATE ROUND DRAFT SUCCESS IS NOTHING NEW TO SAN FRANCISCO, BUT THE FRONT OFFICE WILL HAVE TO DIG DEEP ONCE AGAIN TO ENSURE ANOTHER STRONG ROSTER FOR 2023.

NICHOLAS MCGEE
ASSISTANT EDITOR
@NicholasMcGee24

For a team that started the new league year with 21 unrestricted free agents and lost a dozen of them, the San Francisco 49ers' roster is still in remarkably good shape.

Although the likes of Mike McGlinchey, Jimmie Ward, Emmanuel Moseley and Charles Omenihu departed, the unexpected blockbuster signing of Javon Hargrave added a wrecking ball to the interior of a defensive line already featuring the finest edge rusher in the NFL in Defensive Player of the Year Nick Bosa, and the collection of talent at the Niners' disposal still ranks among the league's most extensive and most fearsome.

It isn't all about Hargrave, as the 49ers also made subsequent moves that figure to be key in keeping them among the NFL's elite in 2023. The acquisition of Isaiah Oliver, whose combination of size, athleticism and coverage ability arguably makes him the archetype for the modern nickel corner, was an extremely astute one. Prevented from realising his potential to this point because of injuries, Oliver's signing was a low-risk move that could well have substantial rewards.

The Niners maintained continuity at center, imperative for a team that will field a quarterback with fewer than 10 regular-season starts to his name, by re-signing Jake Brendel to a long-term deal, while moves for Jon Feliciano and Matt Pryor provide experienced and versatile depth behind a young starting unit.

Assessing the roster as free agency slowly gives way to draft season, it is easy to come to the conclusion the Niners have everything, everywhere, all at once. Please forgive the forced reference.

The area where that is quite clearly not the case is quarterback. Owing to their incredibly poor injury luck at the game's most important position, San Fran do not know who their starter will be Week 1, and it's fair to say they haven't really seen enough to know exactly what they have in either Trey Lance or Brock Purdy.

That uncertainty prompted the signing of Sam Darnold, one which has left large swathes of the NFL cognoscenti desperate to see if Kyle Shanahan can revive the former third overall pick's career.

Declaring himself 'pretty good' with not knowing when Purdy will return from the torn elbow ligament that derailed San Francisco in the NFC Championship Game and ended their Super Bowl hopes, Shanahan seemed largely unbothered by the identity of his quarterback for the start of the regular season during his media session at the NFL owners meetings.

That would be an understandable position for him to take. His offense is the ultimate quarterback incubator and the Niners have assembled a core of superstar skill position players that can elevate almost any signal-caller to a level where they can win games.

However, for all the merits of San Francisco's star-studded starting lineup on both sides of the ball, there is no denying there are still areas that can be improved and their reserves have been weakened by a free agency exodus.

With McGlinchey gone, the 49ers lack an experienced option at right tackle, though

BELOW: Javon Hargrave adds strength on top of strength for the Niners.

> “THE UNEXPECTED BLOCKBUSTER SIGNING OF JAVON HARGRAVE ADDED A WRECKING BALL TO THE DEFENSIVE LINE

> **“OLIVER’S SIGNING WAS A LOW-RISK MOVE THAT COULD WELL HAVE SUBSTANTIAL REWARDS**

they appear comfortable with a succession plan that will see Colton McKivitz, a 2020 fifth-round pick who has previously provided dependability in the swing tackle role, step into the breach.

The Niners could use an heir apparent at free safety, where they brought back Tashaun Gipson to reprise his surprisingly impactful partnership with Talanoa Hufanga. With Steve Wilks replacing new Texans head coach DeMeco Ryans as defensive coordinator, a rookie safety who can operate comfortably in the single-high coverage schemes Wilks has often employed would be an extremely useful find.

But ironically, for a team whose strength on defense has long been its front, the 49ers’ most glaring need may be on the defensive line. A starting D-Line featuring Bosa, Arik Armstead and Hargrave is a formidable one. However, there remain doubts over last year’s second-round pick Drake Jackson and his viability as a starting defensive end across from Bosa. Shanahan has raised concerns over Jackson's conditioning, after he failed to feature in the playoffs.

Despite taking punts on former first-round pick Clelin Ferrell and ex-Clemson star Austin Bryant in free agency, San Francisco remains in need of depth on the defensive line, particularly on the edge following the departures of Omenihu, Samson Ebukam and Jordan Willis.

The problem the 49ers face is that, because of their aggressive pursuit of offensive firepower, namely the trades for Lance and Christian McCaffrey, they are not scheduled to make a pick in the 2023 draft until the 99th overall selection in the third round.

With two further compensatory selections in the third, the 49ers at least have the means to stock up on day two talents who slide down the board or potentially make a move up for a prospect they believe can be an early contributor.

But a lack of capital leaves the 49ers facing the challenge of unearthing impact players on days two and three of the draft. The good news is they have consistently threaded that needle during Shanahan and John Lynch’s time in charge.

George Kittle in the fifth round and D.J. Jones in the sixth in 2017; Fred Warner in

ABOVE: Isaiah Oliver will bring flexbility to the Niners' secondary.

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the third in 2018; Dre Greenlaw in the fifth in 2019; Jauan Jennings with a seventh-rounder in 2020; Deommodore Lenoir and Hufanga in, you guessed it, the fifth and Elijah Mitchell in the sixth in 2021; and Spencer Burford three rounds before the 49ers took Purdy with the final selection last year. The 49ers have long since excelled at finding starters and key contributors in the middle and later rounds.

> **“ OWING TO THEIR INCREDIBLY POOR INJURY LUCK AT THE GAME’S MOST IMPORTANT POSITION, SAN FRAN DO NOT KNOW WHO THEIR STARTER WILL BE WEEK 1**

BELOW: Can Kyle Shanahan turn even Sam Darnold into a viable starter?

Continuing to do so, though, is an extremely hard way to live as an NFL team and, with no selections in the first two rounds, the 49ers are missing out on the top talent in a year in which many are sceptical of the overall quality of the draft class.

The 49ers, though, are far from alone in this draft in being tasked with supplementing their roster without the benefit of premium capital having elected to use it in high-profile trades.

But most of the teams who join the Niners in having no first-round picks have more pertinent needs to fill.

That is perhaps not the case for the Miami Dolphins, who pick 51st overall in the second round and added yet more star power to their roster with their trade for All-Pro corner Jalen Ramsey in a deal that marked a continuation of the Dolphins’ aggressive approach to improving their defense.

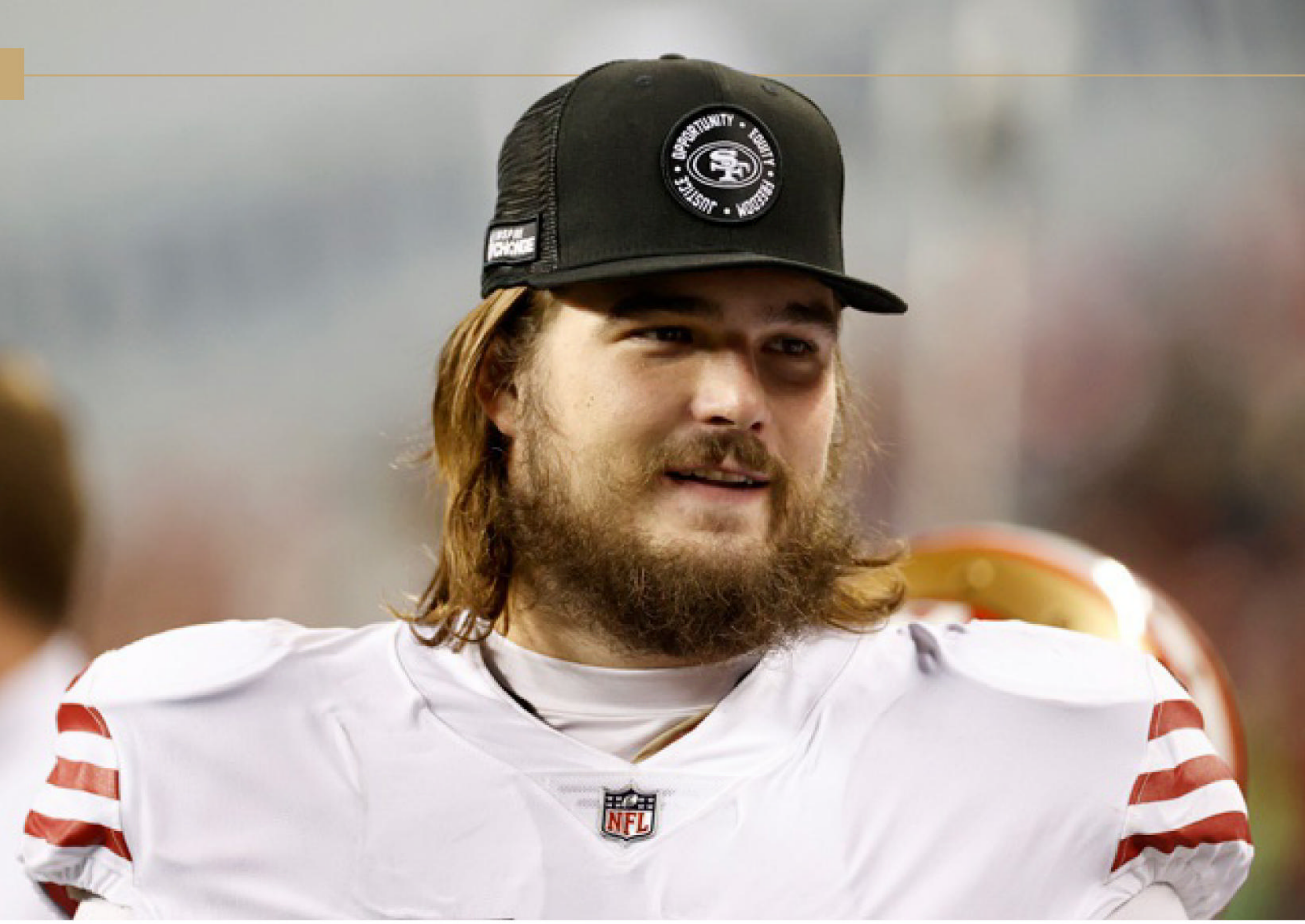
It is a plan of attack that saw the Dolphins send a first-round pick, originally acquired in the trade that saw the Niners net Lance, to the Denver Broncos in exchange for edge rusher Bradley Chubb in a deadline deal last year.

With Chubb and an imposing defensive front playing in front of one of the NFL’s most talented secondaries, Miami’s defense, which will be overseen by Vic Fangio, looks to be perfectly set up to support an offense led by the frightening receiver duo of Tyreek Hill and Jaylen Waddle.

But there is sure to be some unease in Miami about not having a first-round pick to address a perennially shaky offensive line tasked with protecting Tua Tagovailoa, who is coming off a season that saw him suffer three concussions.

As in Miami and the Bay Area, there is quarterback concern in Cleveland, though with the Browns it is more about the level of play of Deshaun Watson who, across his six starts last season, averaged minus 0.061 Expected Points Added per play, putting him 25th of 30 quarterbacks with at least 100 plays from Week 13 to 18.

His performances made the Browns’ trade for a quarterback beset by allegations of sexual misconduct appear even more spectacularly ill-judged. After dealing their second-round pick to acquire wide receiver Elijah Moore — a move that should improve Watson’s chances of success — they’ll have to wait until the 74th overall selection to begin addressing holes at defensive end, defensive tackle and linebacker.



ABOVE: Colton McKivitz.

The Browns were proactive in using free agency to plug the gaps in their roster, as were the Broncos, whose general manager George Paton and head coach Sean Payton were left with little alternative after their draft resources were largely spent on Russell Wilson and Payton himself — Denver's head coach acquired with the 2023 first-rounder from the Lance trade. That pick now resides with a fourth different team, the New Orleans Saints.

Despite a spending spree, the Broncos could still use help on the edge and at corner, but those reinforcements won't come until picks 67 and 68 as Denver continues on a roster-building mission aimed at ensuring Russ only has to play sous chef.

The team facing the most envious task of rebuilding without a first-round pick this year is the one the 49ers have defeated for eight successive regular-season games, the Los Angeles Rams.

The Rams have not selected in the first round since trading up to take Jared Goff number one overall in 2016. That streak will continue this year, with Los Angeles not slated to make a selection until the 36th overall pick.

They do have three selections in the top 100, but it will likely take a remarkable draft for the Rams to get back to contention in one offseason, their roster having suffered a talent drain that is particularly apparent on a defense that is essentially now Aaron Donald and the Donaldettes.

Los Angeles and the 49ers have each followed the path of taking big swings in the trade market. The Rams have done so more regularly than the Niners and, though they were rewarded with a Super Bowl title, theirs is something of a cautionary tale of what can happen to a roster when a franchise makes such deals and continually misses on day two and day three picks.

The 49ers represent the other side of the coin, with their home-run swings supplemented by a host of hits in the later rounds. Unlike the Rams and Browns, they are under no immediate pressure to maintain that trend, such is the overall strength of their roster.

Still, with a Bosa extension on the horizon this offseason and negotiations with Brandon Aiyuk potentially on the docket for next year, it would behoove the 49ers to continue threading the needle and identify more hidden gems to add to a roster that is only going to grow more expensive.

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A decade-and-a-half after his predecessor took the same path, Aaron Rodgers leaves Green Bay for New York. In neither case was there was a big send-off.

The Aaron Rodgers Era is over.

After 15 seasons as the Green Bay Packers' starter, the quarterback will be traded to the New York Jets. He confirmed as much one Wednesday afternoon in early March.

As first reported by *Go Long* in mid-February, the Packers have made the organisational decision to turn to Jordan Love, their first-round pick in 2020. Everyone's on board. In a carbon-copy repeat of the franchise's shift from Brett Favre to Rodgers, the team president, general manager and head coach are all in lockstep agreement that the time is now.

This is a move the franchise should've made the last two offseasons, yes, but it's worth taking a moment to applaud the Packers for finally doing the right thing. It's a great day in the history of a storied team. Saying goodbye to a quarterback who delivered a Super Bowl title and will be enshrined in Canton is not easy. The norm is for every team to hang on too long. Yet everything about this overdue breakup has been comically abnormal. Right down to Rodgers vowing in January he wouldn't hold anyone "hostage" before handing the Jets a wish list (ransom note?)

> "THE PACKERS WILL LOOK BACK AT THIS MARCH AS A MOMENT OF TRIUMPH. THEY RECLAIMED THEIR BACKBONE

ABOVE: In moving on to Love, Green Bay will try to do the impossible: to contend for Super Bowls, in four successive decades, with three different quarterbacks.

that included the name of an old, slow, USFL-level slot receiver, one blocking tight end who turns 39 in May and another former star who reportedly wants $20 million a year despite being worth a fourth of that.

Per usual, Rodgers used Pat McAfee's platform to spin this and put all pressure on Green Bay. He aired more grievances. He again complained about how the Packers don't let veterans leave with "dignity." He said "I'm not a victim" before, then, painting himself as — ding, ding, ding — a victim.

Now, the Jets' brass can work these YouTube shows into their work schedules.

Good Lord. I hope Brian Gutekunst enjoys a few Spotted Cows — New Glarus, Wisconsin's famous cream house ale is unfortunately not sold in the UK — over the course of the offseason.

Imagine everything we didn't see behind the scenes. The poor bastard deserves to exhale, celebrate and ring in a new era. The Jordan Love Era.

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How did we get here?

Pop three Advils. We must relive the headaches. (Quickly, I promise.)

First, in 2021, Rodgers grabbed Gutekunst by the collar and dragged him into the public square for a Thrones-style shaming. Local and national media happily obliged those four months because how dare a GM ensure the long-term health of his team by drafting a talented, yet raw quarterback to develop. The gall. The horror. Rodgers, a masterful manipulator, knew his vast army of surrogates and toadies would do his bidding. A slew of reports indicated that the QB wanted Gutekunst fired, reports he never really refuted. Love was trashed, Rodgers was lionised, management sadly bent the knee on the eve of training camp.

Next came the epic press conference in which Rodgers blistered the Packers as a crass front office that refused to keep veterans around. He was dead wrong. Obviously. If the Packers took his advice, he would've never seen the field himself. But, whatever. The organisation accepted its floggings in officially making its bed in this moment. Mark Murphy all but named the complicated fella the team's new Assistant GM. (Welcome aboard, Randall Cobb!)

Then, the lying. Shot, no shot, I sincerely do not care. To each their own. Free country. But this gross episode revealed both the absence of the quarterback's character and the team's spine. Unlike his equals, Rodgers cares deeply about what people think of him. So we shouldn't have been shocked that the "immunised" Rodgers wanted everybody to think he was vaccinated in order to avoid the arrows raining down on Cole Beasley and others. The Packers allowed their maskless quarterback to play pretend at the podium. Say what you want about Kirk Cousins, Carson Wentz and Lamar Jackson. At least they owned their decisions from Day 1.

He won MVP. He lost to an injured Jimmy Garoppolo at Lambeau Field.

His reward was the richest contract in the sport.

He responded by blowing off another offseason and, oh, what was that? You thought losing Davante Adams and breaking in three rookie receivers would compel Rodgers to care about OTAs? Fat chance. He essentially did the opposite of Patrick Mahomes, who brought the Kansas City Chiefs' new weapons to Fort Worth, Texas for a crash course on Andy Reid's offense. Physically, Rodgers' skills diminished and he flat-out didn't see the field well. Not only did he fail to throw for 300 yards in a single game, but his interception number spiked to 12. He posted the worst passer rating of his career.

At home, against the Lions, he completed 2 of 6 passes for 12 yards with a pick in the fourth quarter. Season over. Packers career over.

There's always a hodgepodge of baggage — the ayahuasca, the shrooms, the informing teammates that 9-11 was an inside job. Before he could squeeze a phone call to Gutekunst into his schedule, Rodgers sat down with Aubrey Marcus for 96 minutes to detail how he wiped his ass in the dark, amongst other hot topics.

Production no longer equals tolerance. The headache alone is enough.

He has become selfish, dictatorial, unequivocally the problem.

And yet the reason the Packers should be celebrated today is that this trade is a return to logic. The franchise did what's best for the franchise. Not Aaron Rodgers. The selection of Love — whether Love pans out or not — was always sound. The position is too valuable. More teams should draft a quarterback when they don't necessarily "need" one. Nurturing Love at their pace has now given the Packers a chance at something unprecedented in the sport itself: half a century of quarterback bliss. Half of the 32 teams in this league are hamsters on a wheel, perpetually hitting reset at QB.

Vet to vet to vet to aging vet, Jim Irsay steered the Indianapolis Colts deeper into the wilderness.

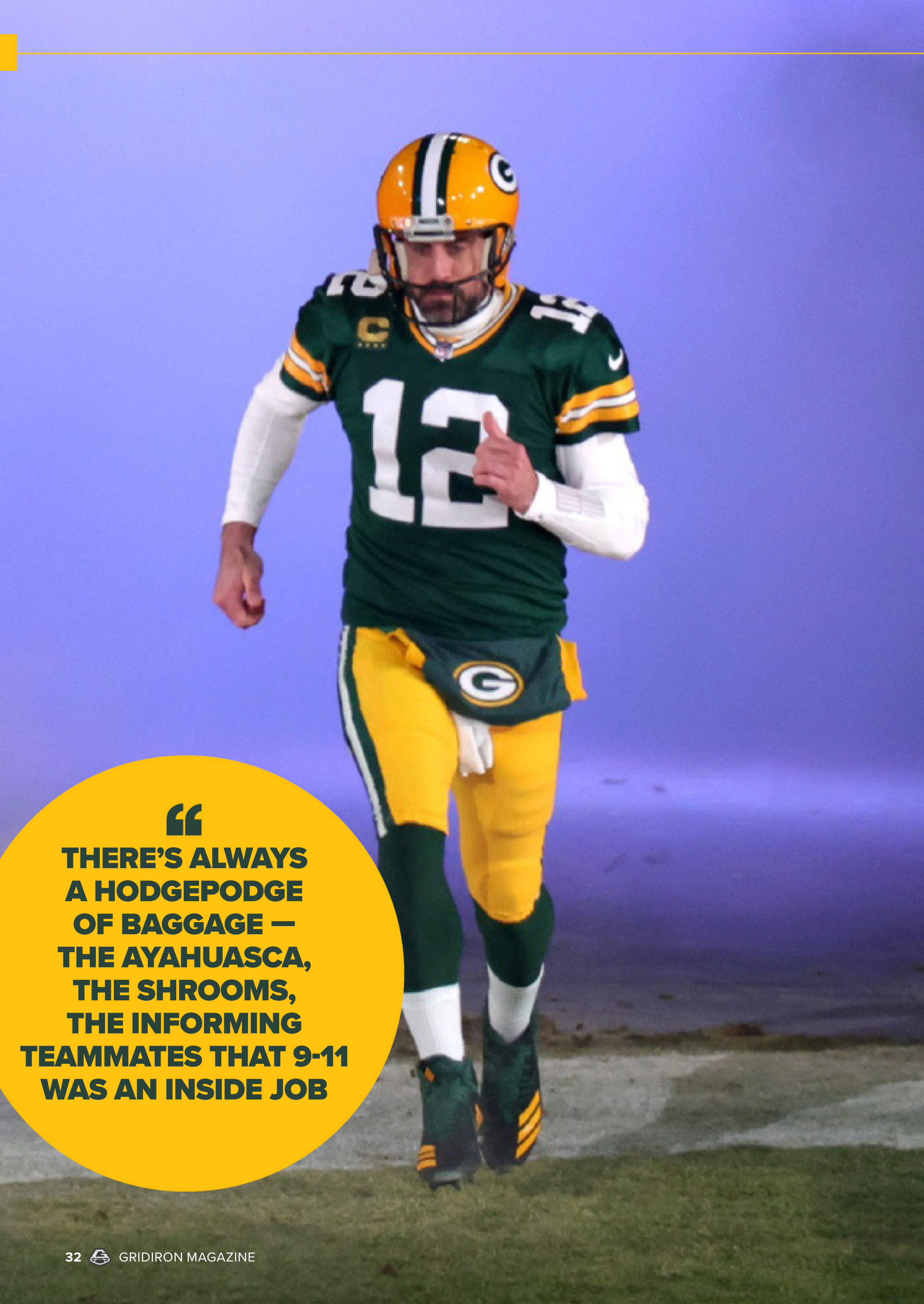
> GUTEKUNST WASN'T GOING TO ALLOW THE ENTIRE ORGANISATION TO BE CAUGHT WITH ITS PANTS DOWN WHEN FATHER TIME INEVITABLY SLUGGED RODGERS IN THE JAW

Many quarterbacks drafted in the first round play too soon and their careers are permanently damaged.

And here were the Packers perfectly willing to draft a quarterback... and wait.

They knew it'd piss off Rodgers and took this project out of Utah State anyways. Gutekunst wasn't going to allow the entire organisation to be caught with its pants down when Father Time inevitably slugged Rodgers in the jaw. Like the Giants. Like the Steelers. Like the Saints. Like every team that gets overly sentimental as The End nears. Their mistake was thinking Rodgers changed the calculus with two more MVPs. Given the silo nature of the Packers' organisational structure — both Gutekunst and head coach

ABOVE: When Packers' brass tried to reach out to Rodgers, they claim, he was unavailable.



> “THERE’S ALWAYS A HODGEPODGE OF BAGGAGE — THE AYAHUASCA, THE SHROOMS, THE INFORMING TEAMMATES THAT 9-11 WAS AN INSIDE JOB

Matt LaFleur report directly to Murphy — who knows if Gutekunst even wanted that abomination of a contract.

Either way, the Packers were blinded by regular-season success. They skimmed past the fact that Rodgers kept on shrinking in the playoffs. They didn't realise just how different of a quarterback he'd be without Adams.

The easy decision this offseason would've been to wrap Rodgers in their loving arms once more. To let him skip OTAs (again). To let teammates follow his lead by skipping themselves (again). To let the QB call for the benching of any players who aren't up to snuff on his paid television appearances, even when his own play is subpar. They could've viewed the three-year, $150 million contract as a timeshare from hell they'd never escape from.

Instead, they were proactive. Instead, the Packers made it clear that they're in charge. Because, all along, their eyes were wide open to another development. The Packers realised that Jordan Love was the one who completely changed the calculus.

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When it appeared Love was destined to be trade bait last offseason, all the 6-foot-4, 219-pounder from Bakersfield, California, did was turn himself into an NFL starting quarterback.

Only those who know Love best were aware of a Year 2-to-Year 3 leap that took place largely in the shadows as Rodgers floundered under an incessant spotlight. Siaosi Mariner remembers training with Love shortly after Rodgers signed that deal. The former Utah State receiver saw an edge to his friend. Steve Calhoun, Love's longtime mentor and private coach, stayed in direct communication with LaFleur. The Packers head coach sent specific drills for them to work on, Calhoun filmed it, Calhoun sent it back and — day to day to day — Love worked. As one Packers receiver told me, it's easier to have a conversation with Love about the offensive plays than Rodgers because Love is actually running LaFleur's offense.

What we all saw that night in Philadelphia was the case behind the scenes all of 2022. He worked with the number one offense a ton in the final two months of the season.

Now, there is no debate. The 24-year-old Love is the clear choice over the 39-year-old Rodgers. No sane team meticulously develops a quarterback for three years — sees substantial proof that he can play — and then lights a match to that development. The Packers learned this lesson themselves under Ted Thompson. As Charles Woodson said, players knew Rodgers was ready in 2008. And players know now. That's why Gutekunst (at the Combine) and Murphy (at the state girls basketball tourney) were so adamant that Love "needs to play." Perhaps Love only wins six games in his first year as a starter like Rodgers.

There will still be growing pains, and that's OK. He needs to face the live bullets that a quarterback in his own draft class, Philly's Jalen Hurts, has experienced for two and a half seasons now.

Love, too, is capable of leading his team to the Super Bowl.

Trot 40-year-old quarterbacks out at your own peril. This is a young man's position. The average age of the final eight QBs in the dance last postseason was 25.3. Nobody was even 30. As Bob McGinn reported, the Packers view Love as "Aaron Rodgers 2.0." Athletically, he can make the improvisational throws Rodgers can now only dream of at this point of his career. Green Bay got a glimpse of this in the preseason where a few of Love's escapes on incomplete passes were as impressive as anything Rodgers did during the regular season. After the Packers' preseason win over New Orleans, LaFleur was giddy. He said Love was "light years" ahead of where he was a year ago, adding that everyone in the locker room could see it.

The brilliance of the selection all along was that it allowed the Packers to build two offenses within one.

There was the clairvoyance between Rodgers and Adams hypnotizing defenses. Then, beneath this, there was Jordan Love growing with other 22- and 23-year-olds on a day-to-day basis. A.J. Dillon, the back drafted in his class, gushed over Love's personality when we chatted in 2020. They got to know each other in predraft training.

"He's definitely a leader," Dillon said. "And this is not just me trying to hype him up. He has a presence in the room. He is somebody that won't be hard to follow."

More teammates soon joined. North Dakota State's Christian Watson looks like a potential star. Nevada's Romeo Doubs could become a solid No. 2. Aaron Jones knew there was a good chance Rodgers was leaving and still accepted a pay cut. In the draft, the Packers will have a chance to pick both a tight end and a wide receiver. All while cutting the fat off the roster. No longer will Marcedes Lewis and Cobb stunt the growth of others simply because Rodgers needs his buddies around.

We saw the same effect as Rodgers supplanted Favre, another legend who followed his own set of rules those final years. The entitlement we heard in Favre's voice on Greta Van Susteren in 2008 was alive and well in Rodgers' voice as he stated his desire to join the Jets. Listen carefully and you'll hear desperation in both interviews — it's difficult for every longtime great to know their services are no longer required.

Removing such an ornery voice from the team equation will be beyond refreshing. A younger core can relate to its younger quarterback. This manifests in ways we see and don't see.

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One of Love's best wide receivers at Utah State who also happens to be one of his best friends to this day — Ron'Quavion Tarver — brings up the day Love helped him move in college. Love could notice something was wrong. Typically, Tarver is an outspoken, fun-loving dude. Tarver told him that his grandfather had just died. So, right then, Love brought him to the practice field to run routes and take his mind off it.

"Jordan's a good guy," Tarver says. "You can always talk to him. You can always rely on him."

Even when Love became the big man on campus, even when he was drafted in the first round, Tarver insists his personality never changed: "No cockiness. No arrogance. None of that." They still chat daily via text and Snapchat. Love visits him in Miami any chance he can. Tarver believes the unspeakable trauma Love endured as a teen — losing a father to suicide — shaped his life perspective. He knows what's truly important. Waiting three years to start hasn't weighed on him mentally because, as Tarver notes, "he's been through much worse things in life."

Tarver promises that Love will get to know every single player on the team. He'll seek true relationships, on and off the field.

"It's going to be more than just football in the locker room with Jordan," Tarver says. "It's going to turn into a family."

And by finally ushering in a new era, the Packers have a golden opportunity to rebuild a stronger culture than the one Rodgers leaves behind. You know, a quarterback who'll actually give a damn about the offseason. When Love entered the 2018 season as Utah State's starter, he stayed on campus through the summer — and teammates followed his lead. They made breakfast together. Cooked steaks. Love didn't ask players to join him on the field for extra reps.

He told them.

Tarver didn't have a car, so Love picked him up every morning for meetings. He grasped the importance of each session.

He'll keep football fun, too.

"You know how everyone loves Cam Newton?" Tarver says. "He likes to dance. He loves kids. I think Jordan could change the culture. I don't know how to say it, but he's totally different from A-Rod. He's more outspoken. He likes to have more fun. A-Rod is an older guy than Jordan. Eventually, he'll get to the

"WAITING THREE YEARS TO START HASN'T WEIGHED ON HIM MENTALLY BECAUSE HE'S BEEN THROUGH MUCH WORSE THINGS IN LIFE.

BELOW: The Packers are ready to turn the page to Jordan Love. Is *he* ready?

point like A-Rod where he's more laidback but, Jordan, he likes to have fun. He loves fun. And that comes with winning."

That's why his favourite memory from college is Love shushing the BYU crowd after an RPO touchdown.

There's no doubt in his mind that Love will be one of the best quarterbacks in the sport. "If there's anything close to Patrick Mahomes," he says, "it would be Jordan."

What always blows my mind through this melodrama is not the fact that kids hear a famous quarterback freely pontificate about the wonders of doing drugs or even that Rodgers penned a "wish list" for the Jets like all of our kids writing letters to Santa. No, it's that all of the deafening noise clouds the fact that Rodgers has been a postseason failure.

Especially of late. Each loss is worst than the last.

- The punt-punt-punt-fumble-interception-punt to start the 2019 NFC title at San Francisco.
- Forcing a wayward incompletion to a double-covered Davante Adams on third and goal in the 2020 NFC title vs. Tampa Bay, when he had a shot to run for a TD.
- Forcing another incompletion to Adams on his final throw with Allen Lazard wide open in the 2021 NFC Divisional. He led the Packers to all of 10 points as a No. 1 seed at home.
- Last season's virtual playoff game at Lambeau Field was the worst of them all, of course. A total apathetic no-show.

Forget the career resumé. These losses demand accountability. Since Rodgers' lone Super Bowl title, quite literally everyone else has fallen on the sword: Mike McCarthy, Ted Thompson, Brandon Bostick, Dom Capers, players at every position. The Hall of Famer has skated on by — until now. Any frustration Gutekunst feels off the field pales in comparison to what he feels about Rodgers' comatose performances in crunch time.

From the moment the Packers begged Rodgers to return in 2021, it's been Super Bowl or Bust. The quarterback busted — repeatedly — so it's time to move on. There are consequences for such feeble defeats.

Maybe Love won't wither away when the season's on the line. It's worth finding out.

The Packers will look back at this March as a moment of triumph. They reclaimed their backbone.

As for those New York Jets? Those sorry, sorry, sad Jets are now repeating all of Green Bay's mistakes in twisting to Rodgers' will. With the veteran quarterback market drying up — surprise, surprise — Rodgers likely knew he had his foot on the team's throat and took advantage. He tried to push back on the wish-list report but, as usual, it's a matter of semantics. At any point, the Jets could've signed Lamar Jackson to whatever the hell Lamar Jackson wants. Five years of guaranteed money to a quarterback squarely in his prime is a lot more promising than whatever these next five years entail in New Jersey.

He could use all of this for good. A pissed-off Rodgers tends to perform. But all of the red flags are painfully obvious. He's only getting older. He's the eighth-best quarterback in his own conference. He's surrounded by more enablers.

Maybe Rodgers leads the Jets to the playoffs, but we know how that'll end.

Even with Zach Wilson proving to be an all-time bust, the Jets never needed to act so desperately. GM Joe Douglas and head coach Robert Saleh now run the risk of contaminating one of the best young rosters in the NFL. This reeks of panic.

Not that the Packers will shed a tear.

Years from now, Aaron Rodgers will be enshrined into the Packers Hall of Fame, the Pro Football Hall of Fame and get his number retired. He'll probably have a street named after him, too. Fed up with Rodgers right now? You'll love reliving the lights-out playoff game in Atlanta, the Super Bowl strike to Greg Jennings, the fourth-and-eight knife through the Bears' chest at Soldier Field in 2013, the impossible throw to Jared Cook in Dallas, the "I own you!" taunt in 2021 and everything in-between. His legacy is strong, secure.

But the Packers are bigger than one player. What made this franchise great in the Summer of 2008 is back. They aren't living in the past 15 years. They're concerned about the next 15 years. That's how smart sports organisations function.

This time? The GM has the fans on his side.

Enjoy that beer at the local pub, Brian. I doubt you'll need to pay for it.

BELOW: Brian Gutenkunst has made the biggest decision of his tenure.

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THE 2023 GRIDIRON
DRAFT GUIDE

GRIDIRON'S TOP PLAYERS BY POSITION

Gridiron Editor and former NFL Draft scout **Oliver Connolly** breaks down the top prospects at each position for the upcoming draft.

QUARTERBACKS

1. BRYCE **YOUNG**

I'm guessing you've heard: Bryce Young is small. And it's not just that he's small height-wise, it's that he's slender. He looks more like a yoga instructor than a professional quarterback. For Young to be a quality NFL starter, he will have to break all of the conventions for the position. We've had some short quarterbacks in recent years, but all of those players have been thick. Russell Wilson, Tua Tagovailoa, even Baker Mayfield. They were broad athletes even though they were short. Young is not. There is no corollary for what he will attempt to do in the NFL. Even after adding some beef ahead of the Combine (and it's fair to wonder how much of that was water weight and how much was real weight) he will still be the lightest first-round quarterback since at least 2006, as well as one of the shortest passers drafted since the AFL-NFL merger in 1967 at 5-foot-10⅛.

There is no comparison for Young. The closest thing I can come up with: Steph Curry. Young will have to redefine what it means to be a pro quarterback in 2023 the way that Curry forever altered the math of the NBA, changed what was understood of three-point 'range', and what is acceptable as a perimeter shot. Is that possible? You bet!

I'm buying all the stock. Young is a pocket wizard. He drifts and glides and slips and slides to create space and throwing lanes unavailable to anyone this side of Patrick Mahomes. As stick-slide-climb throwers come (the essential NFL move), they don't come more refined than Young. He is accurate. He can create offense all by himself. He delivers under fire. He can hit every single throw. He works through traffic and cramped office space unlike any player in college or the pros. There have been some comparisons to Mahomes' bobbing and weaving style in the pocket, but even those fall short: Young is a more sudden pocket manipulator than the bulkier, lankier Mahomes. There is no one like Young. And that could either be the start of something really, really exciting — revolutionary, honestly. He could serve as a reminder that sports are most fun when the conventions are broken. Or he could be a reminder that the conventions are the conventions for a reason.

2. CJ **STROUD**

Stroud is the from-the-pocket guru of this class. He spent the bulk of his career being dinged for playing in an offense loaded with talent. By the time things are done, when all of Stroud's receivers at Ohio State hit the league, he will likely have played with five first-round picks at receiver – and a pair of first round tackles. Separating his game from the Ohio State offense is tough. But within that structure, Stroud was bordering on perfect. Accurate. Precise. Nimble. A good athlete. Stroud has been hit with the 'not a playmaker' mantra, which is online-speak for 'not exciting enough'. You know what's great? Throwing versus leverage; throwing receivers open; throwing where a receiver will not be collisioned, upping the odds of a completion; hitting all the easy throws, and ripping a couple of the how-the-hell-did-he-fit-that-in-there ones a game.

Stroud is the most precise thrower in this class. He is the smoothest pocket operator. He has enough speed and wiggle as a runner that he can create in the second-phase of the offense, something he was rarely asked to do at Ohio State — until his final couple of games as a starter when he embraced the jump-on-my-cape role. Stroud will be the #1 QB on the board for the vast majority of quarterback coaches. He's the cleanest prospect. And talk of a lack of upside, that there's a lack of flash, will be overlooked for the fact that he does all of the, you know, quarterback things at the highest level possible.

3. ANTHONY **RICHARDSON**

Richardson is the great unknown. Richardson is the best athlete to have ever tested at the quarterback position. That's not hyperbole. It's an objective fact. There has never been a prospect so explosive. He is twitchy in everything he does, be it as a runner or thrower. As an actual quarterback? Not so much. At least not yet. Richardson is not that far along as a consistent passer — he's not particularly close. What he is is a bundle of tools, an athletic phenom, and a quarterback who has shown he can do everything, even in the tiniest of bursts. There's this concept floating around that Richardson's athleticism gives him the highest ceiling of any of the top-four QBs. That's wrong. It's his athleticism that provides him his flaw.

At worst, he will be the most explosive athlete to ever play the position. In the run game, he is a cheat code. The ceiling would be something we haven't seen since peak Cam Newton: someone who can do all that stuff on the ground, but who develops as both a rhythm-based passer and off-script playmaker. That's a big if, though. Richardson's lower body mechanics are a mess. His accuracy is scattershot. When he misses, he misses by yards. And even when he completes throws, he misses. Wide-open receivers are forced to leap for the sun or slide on the ground just to corral a basic 10-yard comeback; he doesn't throw to leverage or coverage. But here's the thing: This isn't a raw, undercooked prospect who needs a complete overhaul. The exciting thing is that all the good, quality footwork is in there! When he's forced to speed up his process, Richardson's footwork isn't just fine, it's near perfect! It's about consistency, and the knock-on effect that consistency will have on his general lower half, his mechanics as a whole, and therefore his accuracy.

Richardson is typically dubbed a 'raw' prospect. And that's fair. But what's probably more realistic is that he is oftentimes just bad. He misses basic throws, botches his mechanics, and bails on concepts before they're allowed to develop. But in some ways that rawness is overstated, because all the correct stuff, is in there – albeit showcased in only small doses.

4. WILL **LEVIS**

Levis is the type of prospect you want to take when sat behind a laptop or on your sofa rather than when your mortgage and your kids college fund is on the line. He is the big-armed bomber of this class. He has a howitzer for an arm. He also happened to play in the most pro-ready offense of the group. Rattle through any randomised ten plays from the Kentucky offense, and you can be forgiven for thinking you're watching the Chiefs — conceptually. He also happened to play on an offense devoid of future NFL talent, which makes it tough to evaluate a string of his games. Like Richardson, Levis is a high-upside gamble. He is inconsistent. He is reckless. But he doesn't have the innate athleticism of Richardson, which lowers his floor. A whole bunch of his film, like Richardson, is just bad. You could be forgiven, at times, for wondering whether he should be a Day Two pick, let alone a top-10 one. For the record: I do not have a first-round grade on Levis. Levis will go in the top-10, though. Any team selecting him will be gambling that they can mold a thrower into a quarterback. Your mileage on that idea will vary.

There is something in there. Levis has been panned by critics for not knowing what he's doing. He's a see-it-chuck-it type of player. That analysis is fair. But I do think it's overstated. Scan Levis' tape and something jumps out: his eyes always go to the right spot at-the-snap. He knows where he should go with the ball based on concept vs. coverage. He has a good understanding of the pre-snap picture and where he should jump to at-the-snap if his pre-snap indicator is confirmed. The only problem… he doesn't throw the ball. There's a hiccup in what he does. Sometimes, he'll come off that primary read, quick-scan elsewhere, then return to the primary. That pitty-pattering of the feet will mess with Levis' overall mechanics. He tap-dances as he tries to figure out whether to let go of the ball or not, and in doing so he will either elongate or narrow his base, forcing the ball to come out inaccurately. Too often, he will wind up no longer being aligned to his target — something that was fine early in the rep but that was corrupted by his indecision. It's an issue. Was it an issue with Levis or due to a lack of trust in his supporting cast? If it was because of Levis, will the light ever turn on? Is it an issue you even correct or is it a basic instinct that the best of the best is blessed with? Is it due to a lack of tape study or an issue with carrying over the tape study to the field? Levis, more than the other top QB prospects, is someone that evaluators will have to sit down in a room with, with a clicker, with the tape, to figure out the deal.

5. HENDON **HOOKER**

Hooker has been a late riser in the process, with some prognosticators suggesting he could sneak into the end of the first round, or even rise ahead of Will Levis by the time draft night rolls around. That makes some sense. Hooker is a smart, efficient quarterback. He does all the little things that add up to wins, and he has enough playmaking chops to get any team excited. The issues: He is 25-years-old; he played in Josh Heupel's nonsense, pump-and-dump offense, one with little to no transitive properties to the NFL. Given the gulf between the Tennessee offense and what's asked of a quarterback in even the most basic NFL offense, there will be a steep learning curve for Hooker. A team has to decide whether that investment is worth it for a player who could be 27-years old by the time the light turns on – and who will be pushing up against 30 by the end of his rookie deal.

RUNNING BACKS

1. BIJAN **ROBINSON**

Bijan Robinson is the all-everything back who can serve as a runner-receiver. Robinson looks more like a create-a-player than a real, actual prospect. He was the most gifted player in college football last year. If he played any position other than running back, he'd be number one overall on everybody's big boards.Rattle through the categories and you will find no weakness. Like, zilch. Zero. Nada. Robinson boasts size, agility, break-away speed, and stop-start quickness. He turns dud plays into four-yard gains and daylight into house calls. Oh, and Robinson has shown serious ability as a receiver, in a limited sample size. There's a world in which Robinson can line up as both the late-down hammer back and an early down flex piece, one who can create all sorts of mismatches in the passing game. He's the kind of versatile, flexible, offensive weapon that rarely, if ever, comes dressed up in a Leonard Fournette-style body. If you just go skill by skill, talent by talent, Robinson is the most talented player in the draft class.

2. JAHMYR **GIBBS**

Gibbs is a pass-catching-first back who offers extreme value as a playmaker out of the backfield and as a matchup weapon in the passing game. Now, prepare to groan: he is consistently lost in pass protection. That stuff really matters at the NFL level. It's how backs get on the field, and why some of the shorter, explosive, most-fun backs from the college game fade away before even getting to the pros. Gibbs has the juice and size to be one of the league's foremost matchup threats in the passing game, but he needs to work on his willingness as a blocker in order to see the field.

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3. DEVON **ACHANE**

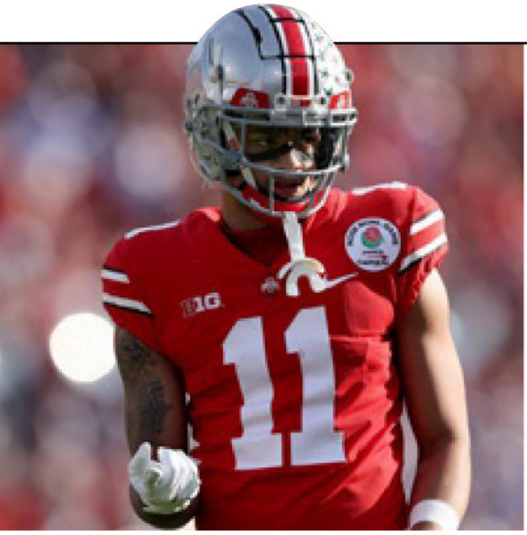
Achane spent his first two seasons behind Isaiah Spiller before becoming Texas A&M's lead back this year. He's easily the fastest back in this class. As a sophomore on the Aggies track team, he ran a 10.14-second 100-metre dash, the 10th fastest time in programme history. Even at 185 pounds, he's more than just a speed back. Achane forced a missed tackle on 29% of his career attempts, tied for fifth among Power Five backs since 2020.

WIDE RECEIVERS

1. QUENTIN **JOHNSTON**

Johnston became a starter by the mid point of his freshman season for the Horned Frogs, ending 2020 with two straight 100-plus yard performances against Oklahoma State and Louisiana Tech. He started nine games in 2021, flashing big play potential while averaging 18.3 yards per reception and producing a 185-yard, three-touchdown performance against Oklahoma. That set the stage for a dominant 2022 season when the 6-foot-4 talent racked up 1,067 yards and six scores, cementing his status as a top prospect.

Questions linger about how much separation he creates for someone of his size; at times, his game plays 'smaller' than his physical profile. He's not as crisp in his movements for someone who creates so much after the catch. But the



potential is off-the-charts.

2. JAXON **SMITH-NJIGBA**

Smoothness. That's Smith-Njigba's superpower. He's a glider, using subtle movements to create separation in all phases of the route. His 2021 season was his most impressive in college, as he finished the year averaging 4.01 yards per route run- - a better mark than teammates Garrett Wilson and Chris Olave, who were both selected within the first 11 picks of the 2022 NFL Draft. A hamstring injury limited him to just three appearances this past season, and that's a worry. But Smith-Njigba put enough dominance on tape, in big spots, against future pros, that he is still likely to be the top receiver on the vast majority of team's boards.

3. ZAY **FLOWERS**

Slippery. There's no other way to describe Flowers. He's a sudden, oily mover. Think of Julian Edelman at the apex of his powers: Someone who can shake a defender early in the route or create late, and then go grab some more yards after the catch. He plays with the kind of bounce that wins in the NFL; receivers are forced to create in short areas – you don't create masses of separation in the pros. Flowers wins by digging into his route and then creating with a wiggle late in the rep, and that, at any level, is unguardable. Some teams will worry about his size, but Devonta Smith, Edelman and the like have proven a sturdy receiver matters more than a big one.

4. JORDAN **ADDISON**

As the winner of the Biletnikoff award at Pittsburgh in 2021, Addison heads to the NFL draft as one of the best route runners in football. Addison torched the college game while playing for Pitt. He racked up 1,593 yards and 17 touchdowns in that award-winning season. He transferred out of the ACC ahead of the 2022 season, ending up with USC. Addison's season didn't go as promised, but he still featured heavily in the offense and showed the kind of lateral quicks and change of direction skills that made him so tough to cover at Pitt. Grabbing Addison now, when his stock has shrunk a little, would be great value for any team.

TIGHT ENDS

1. DARNELL **WASHINGTON**

There isn't a true #1 tight end in this class. The top-four players all fit different profiles. So, as with linebackers in the modern game, it's more about what skill-set you're looking for within your system than a player who is indisputably the best across the board. Still: Washington is the player that should get any staff or fan-base excited. He's the athletic phenom of this draft class. It's not often you see a 6-7, 270 lbs player hurdle defenders. Washington does it on the regular! At Georgia, he was ostensibly used as a sixth offensive lineman. And he's a mauler in the run game. But there's plenty of untapped potential as a receiver, too. He averaged 17.2 yards per catch over the course of his college career. On those 45 receptions at Georgia, he forced 14 missed tackles and averaged 7.5 yards after the catch per reception. Georgia didn't need him to be a down-the-field dynamo. In the NFL, that potential could be something special.

2. MICHAEL **MAYER**

Mayer is the ideal combo tight end:

he is a bruiser in the run-game who can also punish defenses in the middle of the field. Mayer has a high floor. At worst, he will be a decent-ish blocker in the pros who can be relliable one-on-one. The question is whether he has the twitch or long-speed to be a game-breaker.

3. DALTON **KINCAID**

Kincaid is the top 'move' tight end in this class. He's a receiver in a tight ends body – an oversized 'X' or boundary receiver playing as a tight end. He will be one of the league's smallest tight ends as a starter – and he is one of the oldest prospects in the class. Only three tight ends in the NFL last year were 240 lbs. Kincaid is a tough one: he was one of college football's best and most dynamic players. But his physical profile doesn't match up with someone who will be a dynamic, multi-positional player at the next level. If you look across the league, there are a dearth of flexible tight ends. The league has moved on from that trend. They get receivers to be receivers – and they have the tight end do all the tight end stuff. They are still mismatch weapons over the middle of the field and in creating after the catch, but there's less movement around the formation from the highs of the Jimmy Graham-Rob Gronkowski era. Kincaid's skill-set feels like it would have blossomed eight years ago. What if he's just a bigger, slower receiver? But what if you can construct a fresh offense around a move tight end? Team building is hard.

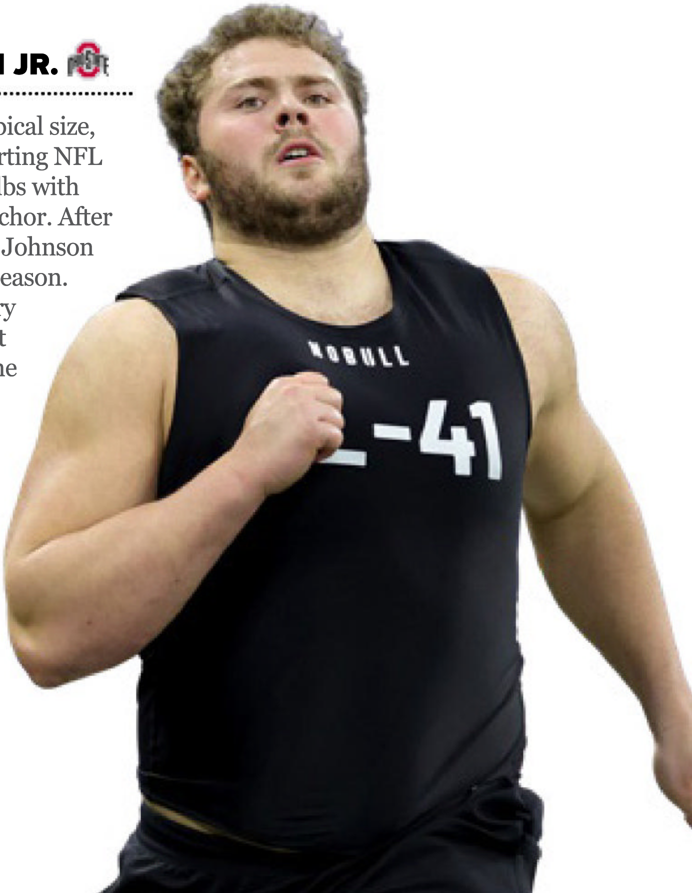
4. SAM **LAPORTA**

LaPorta was the focal point of a truly awful Iowa passing game. He finished with 18 more receptions than any other Hawkeye weapon in 2021 and 24 more in 2022. Despite that, LaPorta is still raw as a route runner. He's not a technician; he's a bulldozer. But LaPorta is electric after the catch. He can break tackles and wriggle by smaller, agile defenders in the open field. It feels like his best football will be in front of him with a competent passing attack.

OFFENSIVE TACKLES

1. PARIS **JOHNSON JR.**

Johnson has the prototypical size, length and hops for a starting NFL left tackle. He's 6-6, 310 lbs with slick feet and a sturdy anchor. After playing some as a guard, Johnson kicked out to tackle last season. He has all of the necessary tools to be a franchise left tackle in the NFL – and he still has room to grow.



2. PETER **SKORONSKI**

Skoronski is a pass pro savant. His 1.3% pressure rate allowed ranked second in the country last season, despite concerns about his size. Skoronski has short arms. That's the knock. Some teams – and analysts – view him as a guard. But given his success in Big Ten play against some of the nation's top draft prospects over the past two seasons – prospects he dominated – it's seems like he's been able to find some mechanical solutions to his lack of arm length.

3. ANTON **HARRISON**

If you want someone to deliver otherworldly pass protection for 50 reps, Harrison is your guy. He's not going to drive an edge defender off the field and into the sideline wall, but his work in pass pro is infinitely more valuable than those flashy, highlight moments in the run game. Pass-rushers cannot move Harrison off his spot, and he has light enough feet to dance and move with even the most twitched up rushers. Over 425 pass blocking snaps last season, he gave up only 1 sack and 8 hurries. He is a ready-to-go, starting left tackle in the NFL.

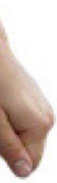
4. BRODERICK **JONES**

Jones is the tackle prospect that has all the o-line coaches and experts cooling themselves with home made fans. He is a massive tackle prospect who also just so happens to have the quickest feet in the class. Finding that combination together isn't just rare; it never happens. Big guys typically get by because their feet are quick enough. Jones is downright fast! There are a number of issues with his technique. He got by in college by being bigger and quicker than everyone. In the NFL, that won't be enough. But he has the ideal skill-set for any o-line coach to go. It won't be a shocker if he's a top-10 pick. His skill-set is too rare and too valuable.

5. DARNELL **WRIGHT**

The top thing on Wright's CV: He played Alabama's Will Anderson, the best overall prospect in the class, to a draw when the two faced off this season. That was an NFL on NFL matchup, and Wright showcased his chops in pass protection. Wright switched from right tackle to left tackle for his senior season and had his best year yet. He didn't allow a sack and only gave up a pressure on 1.7% of his pass-blocking snaps this season, trailing only Ohio State's Dawand Jones and Peter Skoronski among Power Five tackles. At 335 pounds, Wright has some of the best functional strength in this class. There remain fair questions, however, about how much Tennessee's offense, with its unusual pass sets, helped conceal some of Wright's issues: His initial get-off and his through-the-rep technique.

INTERIOR O/L



1. O'CYRUS **TORRENCE**

Torrence is such a complete, all-around player that, in this year of minimal blue-chip prospects, it wouldn't be a stunner to see him land as a top-8 across-the-board player for the league — perhaps the top-five if a team removes the QBs from the proceedings.

Torrence played center at Louisiana-Lafayette before moving to guard and then transferring to Florida. Torrence is a craftsman in bully's clothing. He has the measurables and the feel of a pound-them-into-the-ground interior lineman — and that's true. But Torrence is so much more than that. He has worked to refine issues within his technique as a run blocker, little corrections that can add up to so much. In pass pro, Torrence is tough to move off his spot. He conceded zero sacks or hits as a Gator. He allowed only eight hurries across the season despite the leap in play from the Sun Belt to the SEC. There was no bedding-in period; he was as dominant from the jump as he was at Louisianna Lafayette. Across his last three seasons as a starter, bouncing between positions, he has conceded zero sacks, one hit and 14 hurries across a combined 1,082 pass blocking snaps, per PFF. That means he conceded a pressure on just 1.2% of his college snaps.

2. STEVE **AVILA**

Avila is one of only two interior linemen in the top-50 prospects, unless you include Skoronski as a guard. Avila finished his career at TCU playing right guard, but he shuffled right across the offensive line throughout his college career. He played some right tackle. He played some guard. His bet at the next level: sliding to center. Avila is a bowling ball of a player who is rock solid in pass protection. He has slick feet for someone with his size (330 lbs) and, umm, frame. Typically, squat, thick linemen aren't the quickest to pull and move in space. They win by driving people back off the ball and then sinking into pass pro. They're vertical players. Avila wins laterally. He doesn't quite have the slippery footwork to play on the perimeter as a true tackle, but he has enough lateral twitch to be an effective interior guard. His technique isn't the cleanest, But Avila is a cerebral thinker who wants to get better at the technique stuff; he's self-reflective and works hard. At times, with his size, it felt like things came easy to Avila in college. He faced a lot of three-down fronts where he was able to comfortably play in a phone box and cover up some of his technical flaws: Sit, drop anchor, shuffle a little bit in pass pro (in an offense that got the ball out quickly) and drops anchor, then clean people out in the run game. Pair him with a top o-line coach early in his career – a Mike Munchak, for instance – and Avila could be a real gem.

3. JOHN MICHAEL **SCHMITZ**

John Michael Schmitz is a 6-4 jar of polish. Schmitz is the top 'pure center' in the class. He is an in-your-jersey mauler who blasts fools who dare to cramp his office space off the ball. At 24 years old, he's older than most prospects – and that's a knock that will see him wiped off some draft boards. But given that this isn't a class chock full of center talent, it's a slight demerit rather than a fatal flaw. Schmitz is a fairly one-dimensional prospect in the run game but holy hell has he mastered that dimension: He's a kick-and-go, outside-zone runner who is rarely, if ever, dislodged from his spot and who can put a dent in the defensive front. He makes the most difficult (and valuable) block – the reach block – look easy. Schmitz has enough bulk to move to guard full-time if needed. Given his understanding of fronts and protections, it's best to keep him at center where he can have an impact on the game before the snap.

EDGES

1. WILL **ANDERSON**

Anderson is the top overall player on the board. The prototype for a modern edge defender is Khalil Mack, someone with the springs to beat tackles out of their stance, the strength to overwhelm on in-out moves, the flexibility to dip, turn the corner, and run around the edge, and who can also bring enough tenacity to fight versus the run.

Anderson checks all the boxes. Ever since he stepped on campus at Tuscaloosa, he's been the most dominant edge defender in college football. His 207 career pressures are 55 more than the next closest defender, and his 35 sacks are 10 more. He's also a hellacious run-defender. He has the first-step quicks, the flexibility, and the dip to be a vintage dip-and-rip rusher — and he stacked up a bunch of production by beating tackles out of their cleats early in his career. But scan across the NFL, and you'll notice a trend: There aren't a whole load of dip-and-rip-only pass-rushers walking around the league. As tackles have screwed an extra set of springs into their feet — and leapt out of their stances a tick early — those edge-rushers that beat linemen only out of their stance *cough* Shane Ray *cough* have washed out of the league.

Having the *threat* of dipping and running the arc remains lethal – see: Vonn Miller and Haason Reddick — but all pass-rushers must now be able to win by converting speed to power and overwhelming tackles in the second-phase of the rush (be it a bull-rush, winning the handfight, or showing an array of moves), rather than just springing-and-then-flattening to the quarterback. Anderson wins in every way you could ask for. He will be a Day One, impact player – in all phases.

2. TYREE **WILSON**

Wilson is one of the best athletic testers to have ever entered the draft. Whether he, you know, has the skills and know-how to play football remains an open question. But the athletic traits are tantalising: Wilson is 6-6, 275 lbs, and he moves like a middle linebacker. Texas Tech dabbled with bouncing Wilson around, using him as an off-ball 'backer as much as an out-and-out pass-rusher. In the NFL, his job will be simpler, and that should unlock his game: Go and get the quarterback! Wilson needs technical refinement. There's a ton of wasted movement in his game. His hands are sloppy. He can deliver serious power when everything is timed up correctly, but that happens too infrequently. But the talent is there to be tapped by a quality defensive line coach. Put him in an all-pass, all-the-damn-time setup, utilising 'head-on' rushes, and you could unlock a Rashan Gary/Jadeveon Clowney calibre player.

3. LUKAS **VAN NESS**

Van Ness has a strange back story for a top prosepct. He was a rotational option for Iowa. There were crucial games, and crucial reps, where he was kept off the field. As 'oh no's' go for a big-time prospect, that's just about a five-alarm fire. But Van Ness' best football projects to be in front of him. He's an all-power, all-the-time rusher built in the Trey Hendrickson model. Van Ness cannot do a lot; he's not as versatile (yet) as you would like. But he brings so much oomph at the point of attack that he can be a valuable rotational option for any team's pass-rush.

4. NOLAN **SMITH**

Looking for a juiced up, get-off-and-go, spring pass-rusher? Look no further. Smith is the twitchiest edge defender in this class. The question is whether he's too light to play in the league. Smith played at a smidge over 250 lbs in college. At the combine, he tested in at 235 lbs. Can he continue to pack on weight and maintain his springs? He can sink and dip like anyone, but does he have the in-line torque to hang in the run game and to not be a one-dimensional rusher? In the modern NFL, the bulkier, power-rushers have taken over. Who's the best pure dip-and-rip guy right now? Haason Reddick is the closest, but he's got so many other angles to his game that play off the threat of the rip. Smith does not right now. Smith was, however, a menace vs. the run. There's some thunder in those mitts. He can convert speed-to-power when required; it's just an open question of whether that power can translate to the league against tackles who will have 100lbs-plus on Smith.

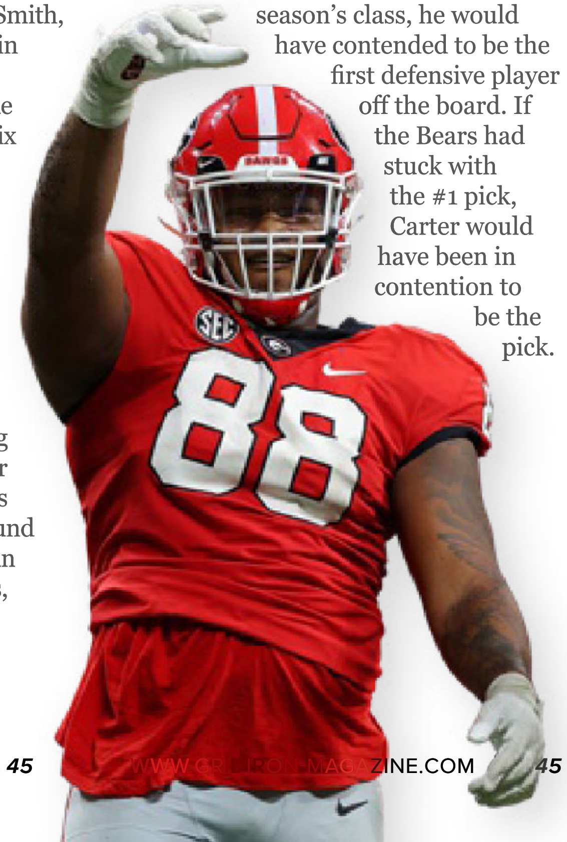
5. KEION **WHITE**

This year's edge class is as deep as it gets. I have 14 edge defenders with day one or two grades. That's a lot, particularly when pass-rush help is so universally valuable. What's more impressive than the volume is the variety of pass-rushers. Every build and style are strongly represented. There isn't a stand-alone crunch rusher and a batch of dip-and-rip guys. There is an even split of every skill set. There are the pogo stick artists (Nolan Smith, Keion White), the out-to-in maulers (Luke Van Ness, Isaiah Foskey), the outside swoopers (BJ Ojulari, Felix Anudike-Uzomah) and the physical freakazoids (Tyree Wilson, Myles Murphy). There aren't many all-around packages — only Will Anderson truly fits the bill — but there is game-breaking talent in every typical edge-rushing category. White is another bouncy swooper who wins with first-step quicks around the edge. He's heavier than Smith, standing at 286lbs, which gives him an edge. White is still learning, he played tight end at Old Dominion before transferring to Georgia Tech to play defense. Often, he looks lost. But he's further along in his development than someone like Tyree Wilson, with a similar athletic upside. White's best football is ahead of him. Someone should bank on the upside.

INTERIOR D/L

1. JALEN **CARTER**

By now, you will have heard all about Jalen Carter's arrest on misdemeanor charges. Off the field issues – speeding tickets; an arrest in relation to the death of a teammate and staffer – have, understandably, overshadowed Carter's pre-draft process. For what it's worth, the intel I've gleaned from scouts on Carter is that the majority of the 'off-the-field' concerns boil down to 'he plays too much PlayStation'. On the field, Carter is essentially Thanos: Too big, too quick, too strong for any player to contain him. He was the outstanding player on Georgia's historic defense last year. Were he eligible to be in last season's class, he would have contended to be the first defensive player off the board. If the Bears had stuck with the #1 pick, Carter would have been in contention to be the pick.



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2. CALIJAH **KANCEY**

Pitt interior defensive lineman Calijah Kancey went from being a fringe first-round draft pick to a potential top-ten player after leaping out of the building at the Combine in Indy. Kancey is an explosive, undersized rusher, and he tested unlike any other recent interior d-lineman. Kancey ranks in the first percentile in terms of height and weight for interior linemen and in the 95th-plus for get-off, burst and speed. The question all teams will have: is he really a defensive lineman? Is he an end? A tackle? A hybrid? An overhang? A linebacker? His athletic profile matches up more with fullbacks and short-yardage running backs than any linemen or outside linebackers. And, if he has to push to the edge, does he have the burst off the ball (and in-out twitch) to play full-time? Those are questions under the hood, and concerns if you're scanning for an every-down defender. But as a sub-rusher Kancey can be invaluable. He can play inside and outside, and offer a unique threat as DCs look to build out a pressure plan and different pressure paths – he can rush from the interior, the edge, or drop into coverage.

3. MYLES **MURPHY**

Put Murphy in the freakazoid category alongside Tyree Wilson. He has been highly touted ever since high school simply because of his raw physical tools. Murphy works primarily as an edge defender but he has enough inside-out versatility that plenty of teams will see him as an interior rusher on passing downs. He has a ton work to do in developing his pass-rushing moves, but he clearly possesses the athletic ability to do so. The concern: his production. Murphy recorded 96 total pressures and 20 sacks in his Clemson career. His highs were some of the finest, most jaw-dropping plays in college football. But that was supplemented by 20-30 reps a game of wondering if he was even on the field.

4. BRYAN **BRESEE**

Bresee is an explosive, versatile defender. He isn't quite as big or as long as Murphy, but he has more positional versatility and plays with more snap-to-snap consistency. He can align as an interior run defender or as an outside edge-rusher – and that's the kind of all-five-spots versatility modern DCs are craving up front. Bresee was a slight victim of the I'm-naturally-better-than-everyone curse, meaning he defaulted to the easy stuff rather than developing deficient parts of his game. Injuries also robbed him of precious development time.

5. SIAKI **IKA**

Ika is the top pure nose tackle in this class. He's a vintage: drop his ass in the A-gap and dare you to move him off his spot, kind of lineman. That's a pro and con: He has a clearly defined game and he's already mastered it; there's questions about his ability to rush the passer in obvious pass-rushing situations. Defenders (and I count myself among them) will point to the development of Vita Vea, who became a valuable pass-rusher at a heavier size once he was in the league. Detractors will point to a slew of one-dimensional, one-down, one-tech tackles who cannot get on the field for more than a handful of snaps.

LINEBACKERS

1. JACK **CAMPBELL**

This is a ropey linebacker class. No one has all the tools and the tape to prove they can be an immediate three-down starter in the league. Arkansas' Drew Sanders has an interesting physical profile and background, and there's plenty of good on tape, too. But he didn't have the kind of day that was expected in Indianapolis. The worst thing you can level at a modern linebacker is that they look stiff. Sanders looked rusty in Indy. Clemson's Trent Simpson has the most prototypical frame of any of the top guys. He profiles as a guy who can toggle between positions: He's lined up as an overhang defender (which adds a touch of the Quay Walker to his profile), as an off-ball guy, and stood on the edge. Simpson always feels like he's a tick late to everything. Sanders can be early, but he lacks the ideal measurables to play off-the-ball at the next level. Campbell sits somewhere in the halfway house: A little Leighton Vander Esch, a little Bruce Irvin. The testing numbers mean he will probably be the first linebacker taken from this class. He's a wow athlete, with extraordinary stop-start speed for someone of his size. He tested as a 99th percentile athlete at the combine. His closest statistical comparison: TJ Watt. Arm length and twitch are musts for modern linebackers – allowing them to both cloud passing lanes when they are spot dropping into zone coverage and slide onto the end of the line of scrimmage in morphing five-man fronts. Finding those pterodactyls is not easy, and this year's class has a lack of players who match those physical and technical. A group of players, save for Campbell, fall into the in-out tweener role, and may be better suited to being full-time run-down edges.

If a team is taking someone in the first round, they're likely going to bet on Campbell's athletic upside.

2. TRENTON **SIMPSON**

As noted above, Simpson has a strong athletic profile but his on-field skills are a pace behind his athletic measurables. When driving downhill, Simpson is explosive and effective. When asked to diagnose-and-attack, however, he too often looks lost. And that's the number one trait required for a linebacker, regardless of their physical makeup: Being able to sag into zones and then drive, to cut crossers, to roll down then break out, to sift and find the ball through traffic.

3. DAIYAN **HENLEY**

Henley is an x-factor in this class. He is on the older side, which put some teams off from the get-to. He hasn't been tabbed among the Big Three at the position for much of the process, but he's been a late riser. His athletic testing has been strong, pushing teams and evaluators back to the tape – and the tape is strong. Henley is a former wide receiver who moves as well as anyone in space. He isn't a sift-and-find, drift-through-the-fractures-of-the-line type linebacker... but who cares? How much of that is needed in the modern game? Those skills are still needed and valuable, but if you're picking between a one-dimensional linebacker, it's best to have the coverage-first guy these days than the sift-and-finder. Henley will be a plus in coverage from the get-go. He runs like a receiver, he has long arms, and he is ferocious once he arrives at the collision point.

CORNERBACKS

1. CHRISTIAN **GONZALEZ**

Gonzalez is the prototypical cornerback prospect. Everything he does looks effortless. At 6-foot-2, 201lbs, he moves extremely well for his size. Gonzalez has displayed an array of coverage skills: he's mauled people in bump-and-run coverage; he's shown sharp instincts when pressing-and-trailing (the most used style in the NFL); he's shown great instincts sagging off in off-man and zone-coverages,

undercutting throws to make plays on the ball. With arms so long he looks like he can tie his shoes stood up, he profiles as a pure press-corner at the next level, with enough in-out versatility to move around the defensive formation. There aren't typically homerun cornerback picks; it's a volatile position. But Gonzalez is one of those rare homeruns.

2. DEVON **WITHERSPOON**

What to do with Witherspoon? Through tape alone, he may be the very best player in this class. By the measurables, he will make history when he's selected in the top-15 (perhaps top-8) picks. Witherspoon is undersized. He has shorter arms. He's light. Taken together, those traits make pro teams wince. But Witherspoon plays bigger than his size. He's a missle versus the run. He's a savant in press-and-trail technique, making up for his lack of arm length with smarts and instincts. And he's the slickest in-out mover in the class, giving him the kind of anywhere-in-the-backfield versatility needed in the modern era as offenses motion, shift and move around pre-snap. Think of him as Darius Slay. Knowing what you know today, would you take Slay in the top-10 of a draft? You sure would.

3. DEONTE **BANKS**

The contrast to Witherspoon is Banks. Banks is, in essence, Stephon Gilmore. He's a big, thick, long, bump-and-run corner. He wins by stone-walling receivers at the snap, dislodging them from their routes, and throwing off the timing off the offense. He isn't as fluid in space as Witherspoon, but he's plenty fluid enough for someone of his size. Unlike other man-coverage-only corners in this class, who get some coverage help from their scheme, Banks has shown he can toggle between alignments even at his size – playing some off-ball, playing some in the slot. If anything, his menu will be limited once he arrives in the pros: Go and plant those long arms on a receiver and run all over the field. With his size and skills, there's a chance he's a shock top-ten pick.

4. CAM **SMITH**

Smith is an instinctive playmaker who lacks some of the high-end athleticism that is coveted at the position. Given his lack of springs, he might slide to Day Two. A whole bunch of NFL coverage concepts feature 'match' principles. Meaning: the coverage mutates on the fly depending on the concept being run by the offense and where the receivers wind up on the field. It's nerdy stuff. It's difficult to run. On the fly, it takes nods and winks and smarts and athleticism. That's why some of the best athletic testers flame out at the position. Playing corner in the NFL, with the volume of match coverages, is as intellectually challenging as playing quarterback. Smith is a match coverage savant. He knows where to be. He arrives in all the right places at all the right times. He rarely, if ever, gives up big plays. He rolls in and out of breaks like a receiver – and he makes a ton of plays on the ball. Smith will probably fall behind some of the athletic phenoms in this class. But, if he stays healthy, he'll be an impactful player from the jump.

5. JOEY **PORTER JR.**

Porter is a ginormous corner with a massive wingspan. Plenty of analysts and evaluators will have him closely comped to Deonte Banks and, like Banks, they will compare him to Stephon Gilmore. The consensus has Porter Jr. third in the class among corners. I'm not there. Porter is too grabby. He panics. Banks, like Gilmore, is patient. They win with a punch, and then they've mastered the art of reading hips and diagnosing route patterns. Porter wants to be more physical. He punches, he grabs, and he rides that down the field. That style can work in college. In the pros, the players are too good and the officials too whistle happy. Once he's disengaged from the receiver, Porter lacks the high-end speed needed to recover, and the short-area twitch to cut in-and-out. He needs to develop a secondary move after the punch. If he can do that, he has the physical profile to be one of the rare corners who can truly match up with #1 receivers on the perimeter.

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SAFETIES

1. BRIAN **BRANCH**

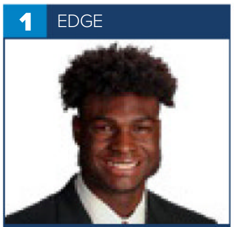
In a dud of a safety class, Branch stands alone. Branch might be the most fun player in the entire country. He is a top-10 talent who can align anywhere on the field. He is a heat-seeker at the position despite being undersized (6-0, 193 lbs). There's some Honey Badger to his game: He can align anywhere in the defensive backfield. He's a high-level slot corner, he can play off the ball (only 101 snaps in his career though), and he can move and roll all over the place pre-snap, which would help make up for some concerns about his natural agility. He also played a bunch as a dime linebacker in Alabama's system. At his size, that might be tough in the NFL, but he's plays the run with such ferocity and authority that he will be able to get away with it in spurts. Defensive coordinators will be falling over themselves to get Branch on their defense.

2. ANTONIO **JOHNSON**

Like Branch, Johnson bounced around the Aggies defensive backfield. He played some free safety, played some on the strong side and played a bunch of snaps as a true slot. He's a long, lean safety with a real suddenness to his game. There are rightful concerns about his fluidity in space. Is he a linear athlete or a natural football player? And that lack of agility impacted his production when pushed out the slot – a spot in which he could not win in the initial phase by just bodying receivers at the line of scrimmage. Where, exactly, Johnson plays at the next level is a question, but there's an interesting player in amongst those tools somewhere.

THE READ OPTIONAL

BIG BOARD

1 EDGE

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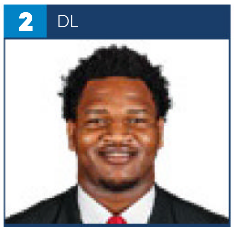
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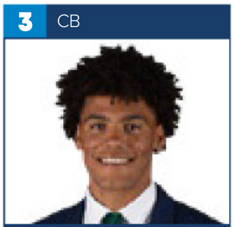
CHRISTIAN
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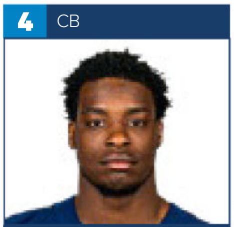
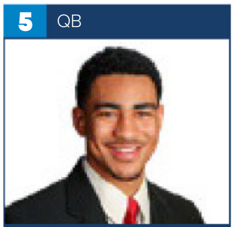
4 CB

DEVON
WITHERSPOON

5 QB

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YOUNG

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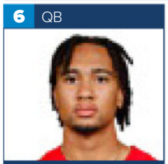
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STROUD

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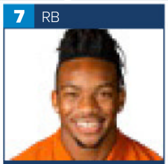
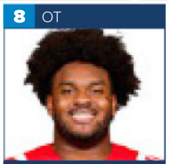
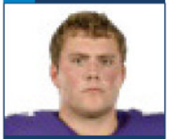

BIJAN
ROBINSON

8 OT

PARIS
JOHNSON JR.

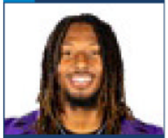
9 S

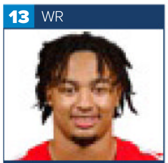
BRIAN
BRANCH

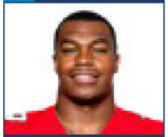
10 OT

PETER
SKORONSKI

11 IOL

O'CYRUS
TORRENCE

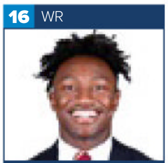
12 WR

QUENTIN
JOHNSTON

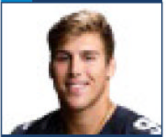
13 WR

JAXON
SMITH-NJIGBA

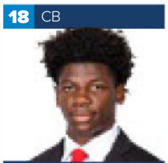
14 EDGE

TYREE
WILSON

15 DL

CALIJAH
KANCEY

16 WR

ZAY
FLOWERS

17 EDGE

LUKAS
VAN NESS

18 CB

DEONTE
BANKS

19 TE

DARNELL
WASHINGTON

20 CB

JOEY
PORTER JR.

21 QB

ANTHONY
RICHARDSON

22 CB

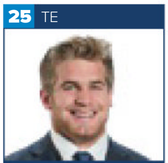
CAM
SMITH

23 EDGE

MYLES
MURPHY

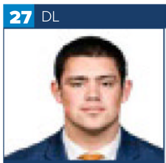
24 EDGE

NOLAN
SMITH

25 TE

MICHAEL
MAYER

26 OT

ANTON
HARRISON

27 DL

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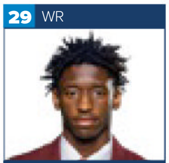
BRESEE

28 TE

DALTON
KINCAID

29 WR

JORDAN
ADDISON

30 OT

BRODERICK
JONES

31 RB

JAHMYR
GIBBS

32 CB

KELEE
RINGO

33 DL

SIAKI
IKA

34 OT

DARNELL
WRIGHT

35 QB

WILL
LEVIS

36 IDL

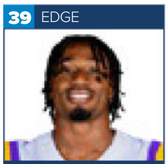
MAZI
SMITH

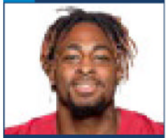
37 IOL

STEVE
AVILA

38 EDGE

KEION
WHITE

39 EDGE

BJ
OJULARI

40 DL

WILL
MCDONALD

THE GRIDIRON
MOCK DRAFT

1
CAROLINA PANTHERS
NEEDS: *QB, WR, RB, EDGE*
BRYCE YOUNG, *QB, ALABAMA*

2
HOUSTON TEXANS
NEEDS: *QB, EDGE, WR, OT*
CJ STROUD, *QB, OHIO STATE*

3
ARIZONA CARDINALS
NEEDS: *EDGE, CB, WR, IOL*
WILL ANDERSON, *EDGE, ALABAMA*

4
INDIANAPOLIS COLTS
NEEDS: *QB, OT, CB, IOL*
ANTHONY RICHARDSON, *QB, FLORIDA*

5
SEATTLE SEAHAWKS
NEEDS: *EDGE, IDL, LB, S*
TYREE WILSON, *EDGE, TEXAS TECH*

6
DETROIT LIONS
NEEDS: *EDGE, IDL, TE, CB*
JALEN CARTER, *DL, GEORGIA*

7
LAS VEGAS RAIDERS
NEEDS: *EDGE, OT, CB, QB*
CHRISTIAN GONZALEZ, *CB, OREGON*

8
ATLANTA FALCONS
NEEDS: *CB, EDGE, WR, IOL*
NOLAN SMITH, *EDGE, GEORGIA*

9
CHICAGO BEARS
NEEDS: *OT, EDGE, IDL, RB*
PARIS JOHNSON JR., *OT, OHIO STATE*

10
PHILADELPHIA EAGLES
NEEDS: *EDGE, RB, CB, IDL*
PETER SKORONSKI, *OT, NORTHWESTERN*

11
TENNESSEE TITANS
NEEDS: *OT, QB, WR, IOL*
WILL LEVIS, *QB, KENTUCKY*

12
HOUSTON TEXANS
NEEDS: *QB, EDGE, WR, OT*
JAXON SMITH-NJIGBA, *WR, OHIO STATE*

13
NEW YORK JETS
NEEDS: *OT, S, IOL, CB*
BRODERICK JONES, *OT, GEORGIA*

14
NEW ENGLAND PATRIOTS
NEEDS: *WR, IDL, EDGE, CB*
DEVON WITHERSPOON, *CB, ILLINOIS*

15
GREEN BAY PACKERS
NEEDS: *WR, TE, EDGE, IOL*
CALIJAH KANCEY, *DL, PITT*

16
WASHINGTON COMMANDERS
NEEDS: *OT, CB, TE, IOL*
BIJAN ROBINSON, *RB, TEXAS*

17
PITTSBURGH STEELERS
NEEDS: *OT, CB, IDL, LB*
JOEY PORTER, *CB, PENN STATE*

18
DETROIT LIONS
NEEDS: *EDGE, IDL, TE, CB*
LUKAS VAN NESS, *EDGE, IOWA*

19
TAMPA BAY BUCCANEERS
NEEDS: *QB, EDGE, CB, S*
ANTON HARRISON, *OT, OKLAHOMA*

20
SEATTLE SEAHAWKS
NEEDS: *EDGE, IDL, LB, S*
MYLES MURPHY, *DL, CLEMSON*

21
LOS ANGELES CHARGERS
NEEDS: *TE, IDL, RB, OT*
DALTON KINCAID, *TE, UTAH*

22
BALTIMORE RAVENS
NEEDS: *WR, CB, EDGE, IDL*
QUENTIN JOHNSTON, *WR, TCU*

23
MINNESOTA VIKINGS
NEEDS: *CB, WR, QB, IOL*
ZAY FLOWERS, *WR, BOSTON COLLEGE*

24
JACKSONVILLE JAGUARS
NEEDS: *EDGE, OT, TE, IOL*
BRIAN BRANCH, *S, ALABAMA*

25
NEW YORK GIANTS
NEEDS: *WR, IOL, CB, EDGE*
JORDAN ADDISON, *WR, USC*

26
DALLAS COWBOYS
NEEDS: *IOL, IDL, RB, WR*
MICHAEL MAYER, *TE, NOTRE DAME*

27
BUFFALO BILLS
NEEDS: *IOL, WR, IDL, LB, EDGE*
O'CYRUS THOMPSON, *IOL, FLORIDA*

28
CINCINNATI BENGALS
NEEDS: *TE, CB, S, OT*
DARNELL WRIGHT, *OT, TENNESSEE*

29
NEW ORLEANS SAINTS
NEEDS: *EDGE, IDL, WR, S*
BRYAN BRESEE, *DL, CLEMSON*

30
PHILADELPHIA EAGLES
NEEDS: *EDGE, RB, CB, IDL*
DEONTE BANKS, *CB, MARYLAND*

31
KANSAS CITY CHIEFS
NEEDS: *WR, OT, EDGE, IDL*
FELIX ANUDIKE-UZOMAH, *EDGE, KANSAS STATE*

The Miami Dolphins forfeited their first round pick after their owner, Stephen Ross, was fined and suspended for tampering with Tom Brady and Sean Payton.

JUMP CUT

Zigging while others Zag

SMITH
58
NILAND
76
LILLY
74
D. WHITE
11
WRIGHT
70

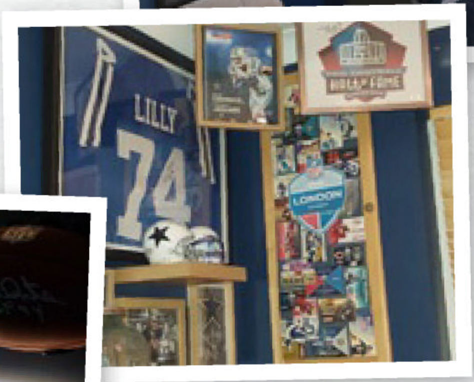
A TASTE OF THINGS TO COME...

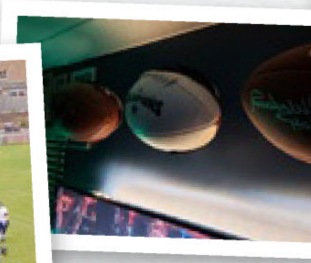
Draft season is all about looking to the future, both for those college players hoping to make it to the NFL, and the teams therein hoping that, by making the right choices on draft day, they may prolong or kickstart a run of success that leads to multiple Lombardis.

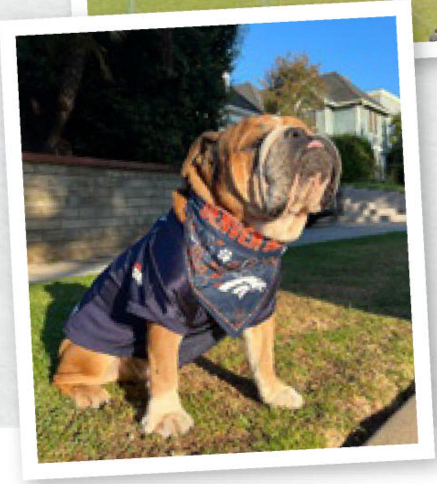
It's no different for The Jump Cut, with the final 2022-23 edition of *Gridiron* marking the perfect point at which to reflect on the future and draft ideas that will bring an expanded mix of the quirky and informative — with a slight touch of left field — to counter the more conventional fare provided by the excellent writers elsewhere in the magazine.

Staples such as Uniform Unicorn and The Name Game will continue, but we'd like to involve you, the reader, to a greater extent going forward. To that end, keep an eye out for regular opportunities to show off your man (sorry, *fan*) caves, fantasy foibles and general football involvement, either on the sidelines or the gridiron itself.

You in?







THE NAME GAME: *FEELIN' DRAFTY*

These NFL players past and present are linked by a common name theme. Can you guess who they are? *(answers below)*

①	4,5	Chargers/Saints	QB	2001-20
②	4,6	Bears	RB	1965-71
③	4,5	Chargers	LS	2010-18
④	6,6	Browns	DE	2019-21
⑤	5,5	Bears/49ers/Falcons/ Panthers/Rams/Bills	LB	1998-2009

THE NAME GAME ANSWERS
① Drew Brees ② Gale Sayers ③ Mike Windt ④ Porter Gustin ⑤ Chris Draft

UNIFORM UNICORN

Draft day is among the highlights of any NFL season, not least for the 250+ college players who hear their names read out from the podium over the three days of festivities. And the weekend is also momentous for the institutions from which those players emerge, with bragging rights for the college producing the first overall pick and/or the biggest cohort of draftees each year. Through the 2022 Draft in Las Vegas, Notre Dame holds the current record for most players drafted regardless of round, at 522, just ahead of USC and Ohio State, with the Buckeyes boasting the highest number of first round selections at 87. In terms of players going first overall, the Fighting Irish share top spot with USC, Oklahoma and Georgia, each having produced five apiece. Two of those schools provided three top picks in the past five years, with Georgia's Travon Walker going to the Jaguars in 2022 and the Sooners appearing at the top of the list in both 2018 and 2019 courtesy of QBs Baker Mayfield and Kyler Murray. Perennial powerhouse Alabama, meanwhile, has only produced a single top pick, and not since 1948, when Harry Gilmer went to Washington. Clemson (Trevor Lawrence) and LSU (Joe Burrow) are the other colours shown here, but extending the timespan just another five years would have seen Texas A&M, Cal, Florida State, South Carolina and Central Michigan included too, with almost any college capable of producing a first-overall selection.

A Good Month For...

JIMMY GAROPPOLO

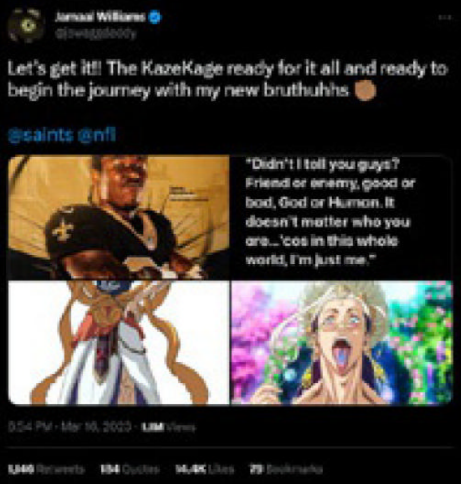
Not only did the NFL's 'most handsome man' finally get a three-year $67.5m release from the Bay Area, moving to the Raiders immediately brought the full Sin City treatment with local brothel Chicken Ranch offering him 'free sex for life'.

A BAD MONTH FOR...

NFL INSIDERS

The inflated egos of football's self-styled newsbreakers were pricked by erstwhile Green Bay QB Aaron Rodgers who, having already declared they "don’t know shit" about him because they aren't "in my inner circle", told ESPN's Adam Schefter to "lose this number".

Social Post Of The Month



Jamaal Williams

Let's get it!! The KazeKage ready for it all and ready to begin the journey with my new bruthuhhs

@saints @nfl

"Didn't I tell you guys? Friend or enemy, good or bad, God or Human. It doesn't matter who you are...'cos in this whole world, I'm just me."

New Saint Jamaal Williams is taking his Naruto-inspired alter ego to the bayou. Buckle up NOLA!

Quote Of The Month

"Right now, he's Bono walking around New York City. But I've told him that, in this business, it doesn't take long to go from Bono to Bozo..."

Giants co-owner John Mara with a note of caution for head coach — and new NFL Coach of the Year — Brian Daboll

DEFINE IRRELEVANCE?

Why being the last name called on an NFL Draft weekend should not limit the ambitions of the man saddled with football's most dubious moniker.

CRAIG LLEWELLYN

DEPUTY EDITOR
@craig_gridiron

It was clear that the questions and references were beginning to irritate Brock Purdy just days into his surprise ten-week tenure as San Francisco 49ers quarterback.

It was a glorious couple of months for the former Iowa State Cyclone. Thrust into the spotlight by successive injuries to starter Trey Lance and back-up Jimmy Garoppolo, Purdy walked the tightrope between joining his colleagues on the training table and damn near guiding the 49ers to the Super Bowl. Finally succumbing to a grievous blow from Haason Reddick in the NFC Championship game, Purdy's fairytale season — and, with it, the Niners hopes of glory — ended one game short. The hurt and frustration were evident, but at least the questions had stopped.

It wasn't those wondering whether Purdy had the moxy to be a starter in the NFL that irked the rookie however. Thrust into the role having thrown just nine career passes in the closing stages of a Week 7 loss to Kansas City, Purdy already had the backing of his team-mates, enthused by what they had seen on the practice field and, subsequently, in nigh on four quarters of a 33-17 win over former offensive coordinator Mike McDaniel's Dolphins team. It was more the persistent enquiries as to how far he could take his team as the final pick in the 2022 NFL Draft, the infamous 'Mr. Irrelevant'.

"People, they make a joke out of it and whatnot, and it’s all fun and games in terms of taking the trip and meeting great people and that kind of thing," Purdy explained. "But, for myself, I don’t care what slot, what round, what pick that I got picked, or even if I was undrafted, my whole thing was, man, I just want to go out and prove to myself that I can play at this level. That's always been my mentality.

"I don't hate the term or anything like that. I'm very thankful for how it all worked out but, even though I was the last pick, that's just where I happened to fall in the draft. I've embraced the role in terms of having fun with it when I got here, going on the trip and everything, but, at the end of the day, I got an opportunity to come and play for the 49ers, compete, make the team and do what it takes to push these guys in the locker room and win at all costs."

* * *

Recognition of the last name called in the annual talent selection began in 1976, when former wide receiver Paul Salata — who, coincidentally given Purdy's rise, played for the 49ers in both the AAFC and NFL, scoring their final touchdown in the former and first in the latter — inaugurated a series of events to celebrate the pick in a manner more usually reserved for Super Bowl winners. Quickly dubbed 'Irrelevant Week', seven days of summer in Newport Beach, California, sees the player and his family whisked around a trip to Disneyland, a golf tournament and regatta, plus a ceremony that sees the awarding of the Lowsman Trophy, a tongue-in-cheek poke at the Heisman Trophy — presented to the *de facto* best player in college football each year — that features a player fumbling the football. Salata, who passed in 2021, not only hosted the celebrations, but also announced the final pick in every draft until 2013, a role his daughter now fulfills.

Purdy's mentality no doubt considers the mantra 'last not worst', as in the last player drafted and not the worst player out there, as if in some pick-up game where the least athletic were left hanging. Hundreds of other hopefuls were signed up after the last echoes of his name had faded from the stage in Las Vegas, undrafted free agents who would have welcomed the chance to be 'irrelevant'. Some will undoubtedly go on to have successful NFL careers, but the majority will fall short of their ambitions and hope that they can carve out a future in one of the emerging spring leagues instead. Purdy, for all that he will never shake his 'irrelevant' tag, has at least established himself.

* * *

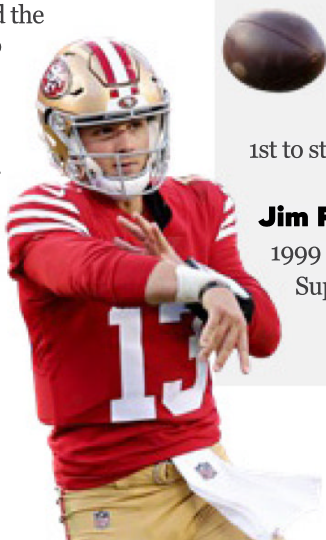
Not everyone taken with that last pick — Purdy was the 262nd name called in 2022 while the Houston Texans are slated to pick this year's Mr Irrelevant 259th overall — has been as keen to eschew it as the 49ers QB. Thirteen years earlier, a promising kicker out of South Carolina was drafted by Kansas City, coincidentally the host city of the 2023 draft, and remained in the league through to the end of Purdy's rookie year.

Ryan Succop may, at the time of writing at least, be looking for employment after becoming a cap casualty in Tampa Bay, but has paved the way in terms of Irrelevant longevity. Career success percentages like 88.5% (on 336 converted field goals) and 96.5% (499 PATs) will keep a kicker kicking around longer than most QBs, but Succop has also fully embraced his Mr Irrelevant status.

"I knew there was a chance I was going to get drafted, but there was also a chance that I wouldn't," noted the former Gamecock, who became the first last pick to start and win a Lombardi when the Bucs, ironically, beat the Chiefs in Super Bowl LV.

"[Being Mr Irrelevant] has been a really neat deal. There'll always be people who think you're not going to make the team and never play in the NFL ... and it provides a little bit of motivation because you want to prove everybody wrong. But America loves the underdog, and it's been a great platform for me to use my story to help inspire and motivate others."

Whoever follows Succop, Purdy and the latter's immediate predecessors, linebackers Grant Stuard (now Colts) and Tae Crowder (now Steelers), should make what they can, and want, of the honour of being Mr Irrelevant. After all, what's in a name?.



RELEVANT MR IRRELEVANTS

Brock Purdy, QB
2022 to San Francisco 49ers
1st to throw a TD pass (2022)
1st QB to make playoffs in rookie season (2022)

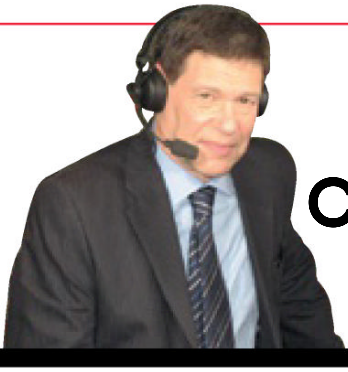
Ryan Succop, K
2009 to Kansas City Chiefs
1st to start and win a Super Bowl (LV)

Jim Finn, FB
1999 to Chicago Bears
Super Bowl winner (XLII)

Marty Moore, LB
1994 to New England Patriots
1st to play in a Super Bowl (XXXI)
1st to win a Super Bowl (XXXVI)

Tyrone McGriff, G
1980 to Pittsburgh Steelers
1st to make NFL All-Rookie team (1980)
USFL champion & All-Star team (Michigan Panthers, 1983)

Kelvin Kirk, WR
1976 to Pittsburgh Steelers
1st official Mr Irrelevant



CARLSON'S GOATs

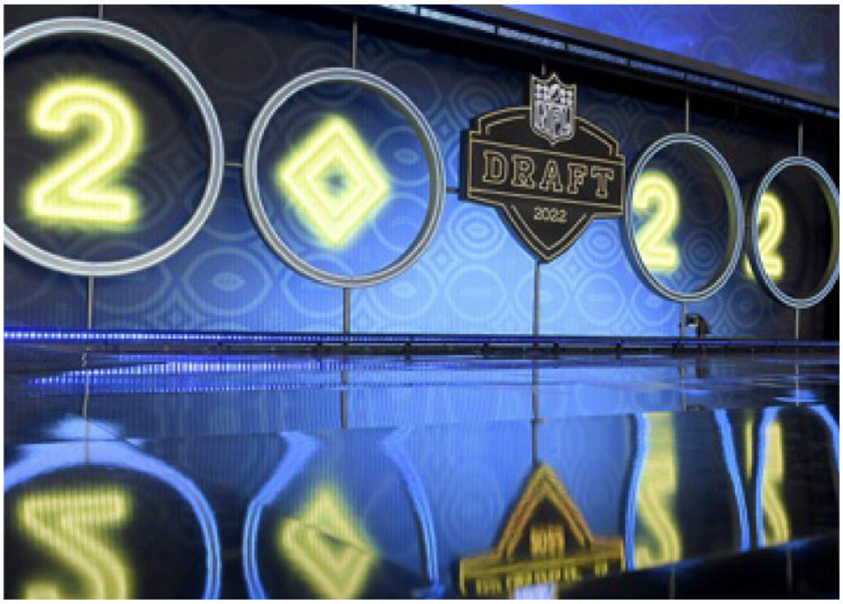
You don't need a talking head to know which way the (draft) winds blow

Gridiron's resident football historian, **Mike Carlson**, leads us down the path to the draft.

I am writing this just after three of the consensus top-four quarterbacks in the upcoming draft completed their pro days, on consecutive days, in March.

They drew a remarkable amount of media attention, what you might consider a circus, given that CJ Stroud of Ohio State, Bryce Young of Alabama and Will Levis of Kentucky were in shorts, without a defense to throw against, working from 'scripted' routines that they've been rehearsing at least since the Combine. The highlight might have been Levis throwing one ball off the roof of the Kentucky practice facility, but you saw the events being reported as if the completion percentage meant something.

This typifies the draft process, which can be viewed in one of two ways. For teams, it should be about addressing their needs with the right players who can fit into their system of play, and present them with options to keep the roster affordable. For most draftniks, fans and professionals, it's more a beauty contest, a chance to pick the winners who will be rewarded with Draft-Miss Runner Up and other honours.



SCOUTS & THE SEASON

The first stage of the draft process is, of course, the college football season. Pro teams send their scouts to watch games, and everyone starts to grade players based on what they see live, on TV or on tape. Like the NFL season, players who play well in games on national broadcasts get more attention, while that star at Utah, playing all his games late on Saturday (Eastern time) won't draw the Sunday morning headlines. Every year, new stars emerge, but what you have to remember is that every game, even with the best teams, features starters who will not play in the NFL: guys who create mis-matches for those who will. You need to examine the actual matchups within the game, even those where a 23-year-old headed for the NFL next season beats up a future star who's only 19 and still growing.

This continues into the post-season bowl games where, in theory, the best teams play each other, although, in practice, that's somewhat limited to the four-team championship playoffs, as the lesser bowls often offer horrible matchups, even if the quality of competition may be better than many teams have faced during their seasons. The two big all-star games, the Shrine Game and the Senior Bowl, tend to be eschewed by players already valued highly based on regular season scouting but, given that most of the players invited are considered pro-worthy, the match-ups make more sense.

THE COMBINE

The transition to the pro game starts with the Combine, by which time most of the invited prospects have quit their student-athlete status and are concentrating full-time on their performance in Indianapolis. The giant meat market is the apotheosis of a regimented scouting process pioneered by Tex Schramm, Bucko Kilroy and Gil Brandt, where everything is measured against an imagined perfect make-up for each position. This year's Combine saw most of its drills run in the evenings, mainly for the benefit of prime-time audiences watching the 24/7/365 NFL entertainment machine.

Ironically, however, there was less measuring than usual, because the league did away with the Wonderlic test, which supposedly measures intelligence, albeit not necessarily football intelligence. It's an aptitude test, with 50 questions to answer in only 12 minutes. As we all know, the best-ever Wonderlic score, a perfect 50, belonged to Pat McInally, a WR and punter from Harvard who had a long career with the Bengals. Mike Mamula, a DE from Penn, scored 49, while another Harvard guy, QB Ryan Fitzpatrick, had 48 — and later said he'd left one question blank. The lowest score we know about was Morris Claiborne's four in 2012, but it should be noted that Claiborne was later diagnosed with a learning disability — and the low score definitely didn't reflect his football ability.

As long-time NFL tight end Ben Watson himself pointed out, the *tests* don't reflect football ability. They do, to an extent, measure ability under pressure and, with the time constraints, questions can be misinterpreted, but that's not the same pressure as having three D-linemen bearing down on you.

The on-field testing can have more effect on evaluation. A receiver whose 40 time is over 4.5 starts to get suspicious looks (never mind that Jerry Rice's time was 4.71) and, every year, a couple of guys will run under 4.4 and their stock will shoot up, even if film study shows questionable hands or an inability to run disciplined routes. Nowadays, the biggest change is the amazing time runs by big linemen. Calijah Kancey broke Aaron Donald's record for a DT at 4.67; DE Nolan Smith ran 4.39, but he's 'only' 238 pounds. Florida QB Anthony Richardson, meanwhile, confirmed what the tape shows about his atheticism: 4.43 40, 40.5 vertical jump, 10'9” broad jump. Given how he throws, he might consider the decathalon if the NFL doesn't work out — except he may be too big for the pole vault.

> “
> **FOR EVERY PEYTON MANNING TAKEN FIRST OVERALL, THERE IS A JAMARCUS RUSSELL.**

THERE'S NO BUSINESS LIKE PRO DAY BUSINESS

The Pro Day is like a mini-combine, although everything is tailored to the players working out. For example, Levis threw to receivers he'd been working with for weeks, guided by QB coach Jordan Palmer. Cam Newton showed up at Auburn's pro day, and showed his arm is still strong, but didn't really prove anything else — though, with the shortage of quality QBs available, he might be a late consideration for some team. Players not invited to the Combine often shine at pro days, and small college guys who show up at a bigger college's day can get noticed, as happened with Malcolm Butler. In one sense, you'd think the benefits of showing yourself in conditions designed to be favourable would present scouts with a caveat, but the reality is it allows NFL teams to get a closer look at a player's makeup, the sort of thing they used to expect from the Combine before it became corporate entertainment with an 18-minute limit on interviews.

LEFT: Ryan Fitzpatrick (high score on Wonderlic) and Morris Claiborne (low score)

11
RICHARDSON
NOBULL
QB-12

“IF A MAN KNOWS NOT TO WHICH PORT HE SAILS, NO WIND IS FAVOURABLE”

Seneca the Younger said that. Although he was a Stoic, he wasn't stoic enough to scout for the Jets. The point is, if you don't know the destination, it doesn't matter which way the wind blows. In draft terms, the destination is your roster, not just for this year, but the next few. Teams need to follow the money — whose contracts are going to grow next season, or the one after? — and need to be prepared. Can they fit extra picks or free agents under the cap? It's a cohesive process, but also one of position fit. Your college scouts may think player X is the greatest thing since Lidocaine, but can he do what your system requires him to do? Do you need a pass-rusher who can also set the edge? Do you block man-to-man and need power inside, or are you a zone team who can use smaller guys with better footwork? Do you face an elite corner twice a year, and need a receiver who can beat press-man? Or do you need guys who can run option routes against zones? Can this back pass-block? Can he catch? Can he catch *and* run routes? This is where it all comes together, trying to translate what you have seen from college tape and workouts for the pros, into a reasonable estimate of what this guy can do on the field *for you.*

> “THE GIANT MEAT MARKET IS THE APOTHEOSIS OF A REGIMENTED SCOUTING PROCESS

DON'T PLAY DRAFT VALUE

One of the most misunderstood parts of the draft process, one that sinks so many draftniks, is the reliance on so-called draft value. Think of the charts which try to set this out in numerical terms. Jimmy Johnson's draft chart was a huge innovation, which told him with figures that trading a star like Herschel Walker for a bumper crop of picks was a great deal. His chart was based on the perceived value of the picks, assuming that the elite, surer thing players available with the first handful of picks are worth much more than those after the steep fall. I go back to Bill James' evaluation of talent (in baseball) as being like a pyramid: each step down from the top widens geometrically: there are more players of similar quality available two steps down from the top than you'd think.

But consider how many first-overall picks haven't delivered on that imbalance of talent. For every Peyton Manning taken first overall, there is a JaMarcus Russell. Expand that to the first half-dozen picks and it's even more noticeable.

Quarterbacks, of course, are the wild cards, who distort every draft because of their positional importance. And this is why you can't play draft value, because everyone projects QBs to teams with QB needs as first rounders. Look way back to, oh, 2022 as an example. How many quarterbacks were projected into round one, how much argument was wasted on Malik Willis vs Sam Howell vs Matt Corral vs Desmond Ridder vs Kenny 'Small Hands' Pickett? Only Pickett, at 21, went in the first round — to Pittsburgh, who may have seen much more of him than anyone else did of any other QB.

There's another factor here, in that the best QBs often are drafted by the worst teams, and teams that are bad can doom a rookie QB expected to deliver results quickly. Peyton Manning had a horrible first year, which actually was not that bad when compared to other rookie

seasons from guys like Dan Fouts or Terry Bradshaw. Sometimes the new guy is part of a rebuild, sometimes he is a last gasp for a coach or GM whose future may depend on his success. You know most of the arguments for and against each of the top QBs this year: Young checks all the boxes, but he's undersized; Stroud looks great, but is he a typical Ohio State product? Levis is more raw, but has classic drop-back size and a super arm. Richardson is a super athlete, whose upside might be Lamar Jackson, whose mid-range might be Justin Fields and whose downside may be Willis.

There is a danger in falling in love with a prospect. Some teams (Baltimore is a good example) do well letting the draft come to them. Others ignore the draftnik valuations of rounds. On draft day, the media herd will scream when a first-round pick is used on a player who was a second- or third-rounder on their *mocks*. One of the key draft lessons is the round tag means nothing. If you are drafting in the mid twenties of round one, and you want a specific guy, maybe because he's better than anyone else at his position on your board, you have to remember that he may be a 'round-two' guy, but he may not be there when your own round two pick comes around. This is such a simple point to make, but so few people even consider it.

PAPA GONNA BUY YOU A MOCKING DRAFT

Thus we arrive at mock drafts, which have basically grown to fill a large chunk of the internet for a month or more, with some draft experts posting enough mock drafts to ensure they will get at least a third of the first round right — if you combine all the mocks together. Like March Madness brackets, each time you get one pick wrong, the dominoes fall the wrong way.

The original draftniks were mostly in print — the two generally credited with growing the field were Jerry (no, not that one) Jones, who published *The Drugstore List*, and Joel Buschbaum, who started on radio and then wrote for *Pro Football Weekly*. And there was The Hair, Mel Kiper, on the Worldwide Leader, when they realised the Draft could fill a day's programming.

IF THAT MOCKING DRAFT GOES WRONG...

The great guys at *Pro Football Journal* went back and found the 1993 draft predictions for those three guys, 30 years ago. Here they are for the first five players taken:

	Kiper Jr	**Buschbaum**	**Jones**
Patriots	Eric **Curry** DE *(Alabama)*	Drew **Bledsoe** QB *(Washington)*	Drew **Bledsoe** QB *(Washington)*
Seahawks	Drew **Bledsoe** QB *(Washington)*	Rick **Mirer** QB *(Notre Dame)*	Lincoln **Kennedy** T *(Washington)*
Cardinals	Marvin **Jones** LB *(Florida)*	Marvin **Jones** LB *(Florida)*	Marvin **Jones** LB *(Florida)*
Jets	Lincoln **Kennedy** T *(Washington)*	Eric **Curry** DE *(Alabama)*	Eric **Curry** DE *(Alabama)*
Bengals	Deon **Figures** CB *(Colorado)*	John **Copeland** DE *(Alabama)*	John **Copeland** DE *(Alabama)*

And here's the way the top five actually went:

1. Bledsoe
2. Mirer
3. Garrison Hearst, RB (Georgia)
4. Jones
5. Copeland.

Obviously, Hearst messed up all three mocks — and he had a decent career, as running backs were more crucial in offenses 30 years ago. Buschbaum got three of five correct, Jones got two and Mel went 0 for 5. Obviously, Hall of Famer Lincoln Kennedy was a top player, but Mel misread the Jets' (and Bengals') preference for an impact defender. So it goes.

Curry went six to Tampa; Kennedy nine to Atlanta. Curtis Conway, a WR from USC, went seventh to the Bears; Hall of Famer Willie Roaf eighth to New Orleans and Hall of Famer Jerome Bettis tenth to the Rams. Figures went 23rd to Pittsburgh, and played four seasons there and two for the Chargers. You pays your money and you takes your chances. Unless you're a draftnik, then you aren't paying any money.

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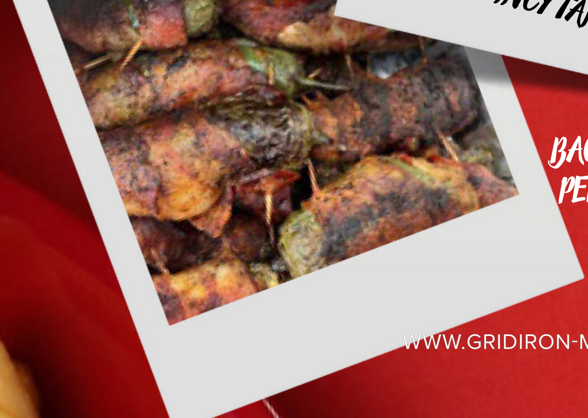

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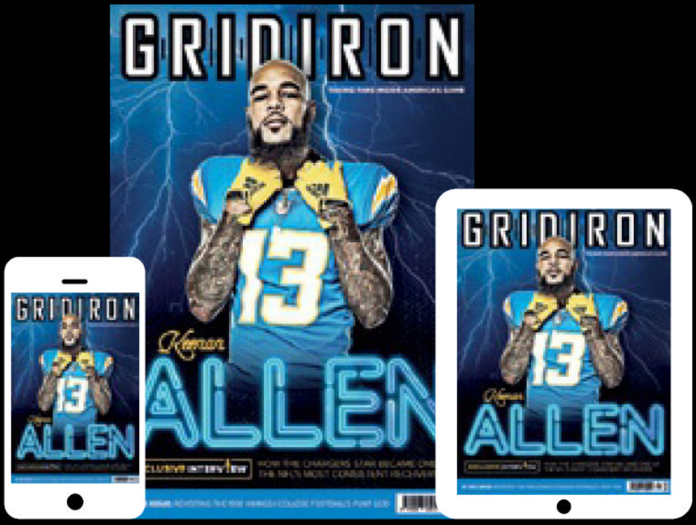
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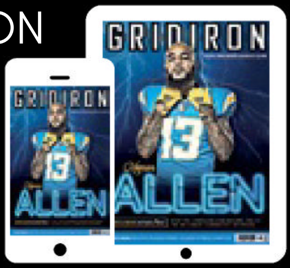
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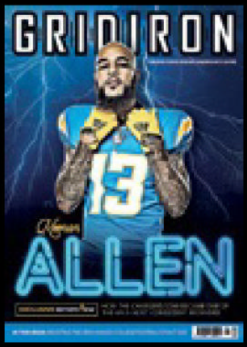
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